The Dedramatization of Violence in Claire Denis's *I Can't Sleep*

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Abstract:
Throughout the twentieth century a significant tradition in French thought promoted a highly dramatized reading of the Hegelian struggle for recognition. In this tradition a violent struggle was regarded as an indispensable means to the realization of both individual and social ideals. The following article considers Claire Denis's film *I Can't Sleep* (*J'ai pas sommeil*, 1994) as an oblique challenge to this tradition. *I Can't Sleep* performs a careful dedramatization of an extremely violent story and thereby points to the possibility of an alternative form of co-existence outside a logic of conflict.

Keywords: Claire Denis, recognition, violence, Georges Sorel, Alexandre Kojève, subjectivity, Roland Barthes

Claire Denis is currently one of the most widely discussed French film directors, particularly in the more academic media. This critical attention is a logical consequence of the quality of her work: her films are visually stunning, highly original, varied, enigmatic and often provocative. Furthermore they are pertinent to many contemporary debates. For those interested in post-colonialism, the migratory subject, performance studies or the relations between identity and desire, her work has plenty to offer.

Examining a range of critical writing on Denis, one may, among several tendencies, distinguish between two approaches. On the one hand Denis's films can be read as subtle analyses of the power-relations at play in modern society. Denis investigates confrontations between men and women, children and parents, colonizers and colonized, immigrants and natives. Her films are concerned with identity-formation and the 'moral grammar of social conflicts' in contemporary society.[1] The other approach is less easy to define as it covers a range of readings. In the first instance it may seem engaged with stylistic questions. For example, some critics describe her style as specifically poetic, musical and open while others write about Denis's 'cinema of the senses' (Martine Beugnet).[2] These critics may draw upon performance-studies and choreography (Elena Del Río) or they

may focus on her interest in the body (Judith Mayne). We thus seem to leave behind questions of psychology, history, ideology and power in order to concentrate on aesthetics and the phenomenology of the body. But as we shall soon see this second approach does not necessarily exclude more socio-political debates and it may even be argued that the focus on performativity (for example) allows a new take on socio-political questions. What these other critics have in common, however, is the fact that they consider the socio-political aspects of Denis's films in the light of stylistic issue.

To illustrate the difference between these two approaches we may briefly consider *Beau Travail* (1999), which is probably Denis's most celebrated film to date. The film tells the story of how jealousy and desire can corrupt a strict hierarchical structure. *Beau Travail* is inspired by Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1886–91) which takes place on an English warship in 1797. Denis's film, however, is set in the present and the action has been transposed to the French Foreign Legion as it wanders aimlessly around in the area surrounding Djibouti City.

Some scholars read the film as a critique of the obsolete French Foreign Legion and the universalist ideals it claims to embody. The legionnaires go through numerous exhaustive physical exercises in the desert, but the incredulous gaze of the peaceful locals makes it evident that the army serves no purpose whatsoever. The legion is a ghost ship drifting through the North African desert: it is deprived of external justification and will fall apart from within as the desires of its members begin to clash with the military code.

The other approach to Denis's film will consider the legionnaires and their community in a more positive light. The many scenes with well-trained semi-nude men performing highly stylized military exercises in impressive surroundings endow the military community with a beauty which transgresses the ironic undermining of the military institution (Denis worked closely with a choreographer on the film). The film thus displays a sincere fascination with the 'military body'. Working along these lines, critics like Rob White and Forbes Morlock have asked whether these aesthetic and performative aspects of *Beau Travail* do not in fact indicate that Denis presents a number of values which we may wish to explore further with the aim of discovering new ways of being together.[3]

Readers of *Billy Budd, Sailor* (and viewers of *Beau Travail*) will know that the dramatic climax of the story is reached when Budd (Sentain in the film) finally responds to the provocations of his

superior Claggart (Galoup) and punches him in the face. This violent action crystallizes the conflict between military and moral codes. Denis's rendition of the incident is emblematic: whereas Melville's Budd inadvertently kills Claggart, Sentain only knocks Galoup to the ground and the scene is thus de-dramatized. Furthermore Denis chooses to render the blow in an extremely stylized slow-motion sequence which clearly demonstrates that there is *no contact* between fist and chin. Even if the scene remains the dramatic highpoint in the conflict between Galoup and Sentain, the violence of this relationship is transcended by beauty. This scene will therefore constitute a nexus for both approaches to the film: it is at the same time the epitome of conflict and a choreographic climax. It may thus be argued that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. And indeed, some of Claire Denis's most perceptive critics (Martine Beugnet for instance) combine these methods when analysing her films. However most readers (Beugnet included) will in the end prioritize either the predominantly socio-political or the more poetico-performative approach to Denis's films.

If Denis's films often contain something which goes beyond the level of psychological and social conflicts, the nature and the importance of this element also varies from film to film. This is not the place to go into details about these variations. The following analysis will limit itself to Denis's third full-length feature film *I Can't Sleep* (*J'ai pas sommeil*, 1994). In my view this film precisely thrives on the tension between the above-mentioned approaches. The argument will therefore not be that *I Can't Sleep* goes beyond the level of psychological and social conflict; it will rather be that the film challenges, and therefore in a certain sense does not 'go beyond', a number of the fundamental assumptions at play in the sphere of socio-psychological conflicts. A reading of the film that takes into account a wider philosophical and political tradition, originating in a certain French Hegelianism, will allow me to conceptualize the nature of this tension, and it will point to the film's highly original exploration of the relationship between subjectivity and violence in contemporary society.

The Unmotivated Killer

I Can't Sleep is inspired by a famous serial-killer case from the 1980s. Between 1984 and 1987 Thierry Paulin — the so-called 'monster from Montmartre' or 'granny killer' — killed at least twenty elderly

women in the Montmartre neighbourhood. He committed many of these crimes together with his boyfriend, Jean-Thierry Mathurin. Paulin was not only a young homosexual mass murderer; he was also an immigrant from Martinique and a drug-using, HIV-positive transvestite. Ultimately the HIV-virus cost him his life before the conclusion of his trial.

In Claire Denis's film, Paulin has been given the androgynous first name Camille, and is played by Richard Courcet. We watch him do a drag act in a gay club, we get to know his brother, we see them at a family party for their mother, and on a couple of occasions we also see Camille and his lover, Raphaël (played by Vincent Dupont), rob and kill older women. One of the last scenes in the film shows Camille and his family at the police station: he confesses to the murders, the family learns the truth, and Camille is taken away just as his boyfriend is being brought in for interrogation.

The story of Camille is just one of three loosely connected stories in the film. In a second story we follow his brother Théo (Alex Descas) — a musician who assembles furniture for a living. He dreams of returning to Martinique with his wife, Mona (Béatrice Dalle) and their young son but Mona is opposed to this idea. The third story is about a young Lithuanian girl, Daïga (Yekatarina Golubeva), who comes to Paris in the hope of embarking on an acting career. In Paris she discovers that the theatre-director who made promises to her in Lithuania is no longer keen on helping her (but still wants to sleep with her). She ends up working at the hotel where Camille and his boyfriend live. Daïga and Camille meet a couple of times, but they never really get to know each other. At the end of the film she steals Camille's loot and leaves Paris having failed in her quest to gain access to French society.

A film about a homosexual, immigrant, HIV-positive mass murderer sounds like a very sensationalist project. Add to this that the Paulin-affair was the most famous French *fait divers* of the 1980s and we seem to have a director going for the headlines in the most obvious way! But even if *I Can't Sleep* is based on a spectacular story, it is at the same time an extremely subtle and discreet film. We are a long way from the shocking violence of other contemporary French directors like Gaspar Noé, Bruno Dumont and Catherine Breillat, and we are equally far from Denis's own *Trouble Every Day* (2001), a film about desire turning into cannibalism. *I Can't Sleep* does not feature any scenes of strong violence and accordingly it did not receive a rating.

The first and longest murder scene in the film is illustrative of this unspectacular treatment of the subject. Firstly it is quite brief and secondly it is in fact *not* a murder scene: the woman recovers from the attack and is able to provide a description of her aggressors that will eventually lead to the arrest of Camille. Furthermore, this first attack takes place two-thirds into the film and it is filmed in a very sober way: fixed camera, a single medium shot. There is no editing in this scene. As Denis stated, 'editing would have been immoral'.[4]

Thus, on the one hand this is a film about violence: a serial-killer story like so many other films, French or not, art film or not, from the mid-1990s. On the other hand, as Thierry Jousse wrote in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*: 'the climate is absolutely anti-dramatic'.[5] In the American film quarterly *Cineaste* Steve Ericson rightly called it 'one of the least sensationalistic films ever made about serial killing'.[6] It is of course this anti-dramatic way of filming a dramatic story that makes the film so intriguing and provocative. It has led some critics (Alain Riou, for instance) to blame Denis for refusing to take a moral stand and engage critically with her characters, while many other critics admire the absence of moralization. But before approaching the question of Denis's ethical stance, it is appropriate to begin with the obvious question: why does Camille kill? In an attempt to answer this question we shall first look for a psychological and then for a sociological explanation of the crimes.

A distinctive feature of *I Can't Sleep* is the absence of psychology. This characteristic has often been remarked upon, not least by Denis herself (Jousse & Strauss, 27). It is related to a number of facts (for instance the non-emphatic acting), but most of all it has to do with the general nature of human relations in the film. In many narratives, and especially those giving violence a predominant role, the staging of conflicts, sympathies and antipathies will carve out the characters for the viewer (or the reader). We get to know the characters by watching them engage in various conflicts with their surroundings. *I Can't Sleep*, however, tends not to establish any such oppositions. It is almost as if the film does not establish any relations at all between its characters.

A typical example can be found in one of the key scenes in *I Can't Sleep*. The two most important characters in the film are Daïga and Camille. What is the relationship between them? Daïga cleans the room of Camille and his boyfriend. She becomes intrigued by a number of photographs showing Camille dressed up as a woman and

at a certain point she comes to understand that Camille is, if not the killer, then at least wanted by the police. At this point she follows him to a cafe. They stand next to one another at the bar. He drinks a glass of wine; she has a cup of coffee. He passes her the sugar, she says one of the few French words she knows ('merci') and in a very subtle slow-motion sequence their hands briefly touch. Without her knowing it he then pays her coffee, they exchange a 'salut' (without looking at each other) and he leaves. This is the only time they 'talk'.

The remarkable thing about this scene is that there seems to be a real complicity between the two characters; but at the same time there is no relation between them. There is just an accidental touch of hands, a look, a 'merci' and a 'salut'. It is a moment of tenderness, but the tenderness does not presuppose a relation. We may go as far as to describe the scene as an instant of grace — at least if we desacralize this word and take it to designate an encounter which is precisely not an exchange between subjectivities but a meeting outside a logic of merits and intentions.

There are other such tender moments in the film, but there is also a more depressing side to this general absence of relations.[7] This can be found, for instance, in a scene in which the viewers may expect Camille to tell his brother that he is HIV-positive. Camille goes to see his brother, who turns out to be in the company of his wife and mother-in-law. Camille therefore leaves and after a brief while Théo decides to run after him. They meet in the metro and Théo gives Camille some money believing his brother came for that reason. Camille first protests, then accepts and finally steps on to a metro train. As the train leaves the platform he holds his hand to the window, but this time there is no touch: the window forms a transparent barrier between the brothers. There has been no understanding between the two and both seem aware of this, but there has been no conflict either.

Whether these non-relations are depressing or not, throughout the film the main characters seem to float among each other, rather than engage with each other. Of course it is impossible not to establish any relations at all in a film. There is dialogue in the film and one can find disagreements and tensions. The most notable conflict occurs half way through the film when Camille has a conversation with his boyfriend, Raphaël, who wants to leave him. In this conversation Camille plays a manipulative and demonic role. The next time we see the couple, Raphaël boasts an impressive black eye. This may indicate that the relationship is founded on violence and that the killings satisfy a shared death drive, but it is just an indication, and Claire Denis does not

provide us with enough material to pursue such a reading of the film. On a more general level it is obvious that Denis refuses to play the diabolical card: Thierry Paulin was a much more brutal character than the one we meet in the film. He not only strangled his victims but also stabbed them to death and he even excelled in sadistic acts like pouring bleach down one woman's throat and burning the genitals and feet of others (Reisinger, 94). None of this is mentioned in the film, sadism is completely absent and the overall sensation is that of a remarkably tender film.

Returning to the question of Camille's motives, it becomes apparent that the relative absence of inter-subjective conflicts in *I Can't Sleep* tends to foreclose the possibility of any full psychological account of the killings. When we see Camille in the company of his mother, brother and larger family, for instance, we do not learn why Camille became a killer. On the contrary these scenes precisely serve to frustrate the desire for a psychological explanation of the violence. A logical question could therefore be: is this then a socio-political film? And more specifically: does the relative absence of inter-subjective relations mean that this film strives to deliver a critique of alienation in modern Western societies? Is alienation the sociological explanation for the killings?

I Can't Sleep is clearly about exile and estrangement in a Western metropolis. All of the action takes place among marginalized people in Paris: Martinicans, Lithuanians, Russians and other immigrants. We also have the homosexuals and the elderly women, so apart from the presence of a number of police officers everybody is on the periphery of French society. It is therefore perfectly possible to present *I Can't Sleep* as a film about the consequences of globalization and the social exclusion that characterizes modern capitalism. Denis invites the viewer to reflect on postcolonial Paris and the flipside of capitalist society. She focuses on those who struggle to become integrated within Western society (Daïga and her ambitions of becoming an actress) and those who have stopped dreaming about integration (Théo and his failed career as a musician). But what about Camille? Is he even interested in finding a place in the Western metropolis?

Most critics think he is and they therefore stress the socio-political dimensions of the film. In her monograph on Claire Denis, Martine Beugnet basically argues that Camille kills because he needs the money to live the high life in Parisian night-clubs (Beugnet, 83–103). In other words: Camille strives for social recognition in the fashionable world of the jet-set. For Beugnet, Denis's film 'appears as a complex

exploration of a perverted drive to conformity' (86). As she goes on to say:

> Camille and Raphaël are not in revolt against the dominant system of value. Their killings do not bear a symbolic, subversive or nihilistic meaning. Rather, they seem like gruesome but logical expressions of a desire to participate fully in a materialistic system, of an overriding drive to conform. (97)

Paulin apparently did just what Beugnet describes. He used the money of his victims to lead an extravagant life in expensive Parisian nightclubs. But even if we do find hints of Camille's fascination with the fashion world, it is not clear whether Camille is motivated by a wish to participate fully in capitalist society. And it may also be argued that Beugnet's insistence on 'drives' and 'desires' is deceptive in relation to this lethargic character. It is significant that Denis had originally planned to shoot a number of extravagant night-club scenes. For these scenes she wanted real life celebrities since 'anything else would have been artificial' (Jousse & Strauss, 26). She first envisioned a nightclub scene with Camille and French pop star Mylène Farmer, but Farmer declined the offer. She then asked couturier Jean-Paul Gaultier, who accepted. But in the end she decided not to shoot the scene, because she was more interested in showing Camille with his family and friends. Therefore, the most extravagant expenditures Camille enacts in the film are with his friends and family. In one scene he offers three friends a very expensive lunch in a fine restaurant and at a later point he shows up at his mother's birthday party with two cases of champagne. But these scenes do not suggest that he is obsessed with conforming to the logic of materialist society. The birthday scene, for instance, could also indicate that the perverted killer is a generous son.

More generally, this is not, or not primarily, a film about globalization, capitalism and the violence which this political system creates. A comparison with the films of Michael Haneke may be illustrative. Haneke's debut *The Seventh Continent* (1989) is about alienation so thorough (and internalized) that committing suicide becomes as long and tedious a task as cleaning up your apartment.[8] And in a later film like *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994), Haneke strives to lay bare the structures that transform ordinary citizens in Western democracies into bombs who may at any moment explode in random acts of violence. Denis's film is not 'glacial' like *The Seventh Continent* (Haneke famously described his first films as a 'trilogy of glacialization') and she does not deliver a cool and totalizing analysis of Western society as Haneke does so masterfully in *71 Fragments of a Chronology*

of Chance. Her film is less explicitly social, less explicitly political. She establishes the contours for a socio-political reading but she does not allow the viewer to fill out this framework.

So even if the sociological approach to the question of Camille's motifs is more appropriate than the psychological, Denis is far from presenting a 'social critique' in the conventional sense. Unlike *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, *I Can't Sleep* does not aspire to deliver an extensive explanation of the reasons for the crimes. To some extent viewers can only draw the same conclusion as the one Denis reached when commenting upon the Paulin-case: the opacity remains.

Denis has explained that the only thing she was interested in while shooting *I Can't Sleep* was the body. When trying to find an actor for the role of Camille, she looked for someone who was able to become a 'floating body' (Jousse & Strauss, 25). And this is precisely what Richard Courcet succeeds in being. The floating sensation is of course very much a product of the cinematography. *I Can't Sleep* is perhaps the first film in which we find all the trademarks of Denis's style: the long takes, the numerous tracking shots, the scarcity of dialogue, the understated acting, an introspective soundtrack, the absence of shot-reverse shots; a style brought to a high point in a film like *Friday Night* (*Vendredi soir*, 2002). Furthermore she has chosen to shoot during those hours of the day that are most likely to undermine any idea of a clear identity (evening, night and early morning). It is indeed this floating sensation to which the title of Denis's film alludes. The characters seem to have reached that state of drowsiness which occurs when you go beyond your fatigue without having slept. Camille, in particular, strolls around in what resembles a state of existential jet lag: a condition where you are no longer sure about the limits of your subjectivity but seem to be floating between a position as subject and object.

In order better to understand the film's problematic subjectivity and to conceptualize this idea of an 'existential jet lag', it might be helpful to broaden the philosophical frame of reference. *I Can't Sleep* could be said to distance itself from a phenomenological tradition whose starting point Axel Honneth has located in G.W.F. Hegel's *System of Ethical Life* (1802). In this early work Hegel introduces the idea that man's self-consciousness is created and perfected through recurrent inter-subjective conflicts: the so-called 'struggles for recognition'. These conflicts (generated by our desire to obtain the unconditional recognition of the other) allow us to become conscious of ourselves and each other; and furthermore they lead to the perfection of

ethical life in society. In *System of Ethical Life*, Hegel's argument does not yet have the metaphysical character it will acquire in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*; according to Honneth it is rather psychological and sociological.[9] However in the present context the key point is that Hegel lets conflicts play a crucial and creative role for the individual and for society. As we shall now see it is precisely this key point that the dedramatization of *I Can't Sleep* tends to undermine. And with the relative absence of dialectical (and conflictual) relations, an exploration of new forms of subjectivity and community become possible.

The Uncoupling of Violence and Truth

Instead of trying to solve the psychological question about the motives for Camille's actions or the sociological question of the social significance of these crimes, it may be more appropriate to look at the structure of the film and try to determine the role of violence in *I Can't Sleep*. An obvious danger of making a film that does not claim to fully explain its violence is to transform that violence into a hypnotic or almost sacred mystery. Denis avoids this by using a narrative device that is both radical (for the film's context) and very simple: the multi-plot structure.

As mentioned, Camille's story is just one of three. The camera also follows Camille's brother Théo and the Lithuanian immigrant Daïga. One remarkable fact must be stressed here: despite the presence of a serial killer with at least 20 murders to his name violence is not the all-encompassing theme in the film. Most films about serial killers are enveloped by their own violence and even in films with just one or two acts of violence, these actions often constitute the dramatic climax and the symbolic centre of the film. To name but one example (which Denis explicitly discusses in *Cahiers du cinéma*): in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* the final explosion of Jerry Kaiser (Chris Penn) seems to condense and disclose Altman's analysis of Los Angeles, 1993. Violence is a very loud phenomenon.

I Can't Sleep does something quite unique. It presents the loudest French *fait divers* of the 1980s without giving this story a more important place than the fictional story of a young Lithuanian girl who wants to become an actress in Paris or a musician who wants to go back to Martinique. In arguing that Denis does not give a privileged position to the theme of violence, it may sound as if I am following those critics who, inspired by Baudrillard's writings on the Paulin-affair, have talked about the banality of evil in *I Can't*

Sleep.[10] Nevertheless, the differences are considerable. According to Baudrillard (who writes about the real-life character, not the film) Paulin is banal in the following sense: he does not know who he is, therefore he surrenders to his surroundings and becomes an expression of contemporary society. Thus Paulin is not only banal but also a symbol condensing Baudrillard's view of the status of humanity in post-modern society. Baudrillard clearly hypostatizes Paulin. Denis, on the other hand, precisely does not hypostasize: Camille is no more (and no less) a symbol of contemporary society than Daïga, Théo or anybody else.

Thus Claire Denis's film does not prioritize the theme of violence. On the one hand violence does not reveal the truth about postcolonial psychology, and it makes no claim to uncover the truth about modern society. On the other hand violence does not point to an ineffable truth. Camille's story is no more (but also no less) telling or revealing than the other stories. This can be summed up in one sentence: Denis undoes the relation between violence and truth. Thereby the film distances itself from a well-established tradition in twentieth-century French thought characterized by the conjunction of truth and violence.

Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, has argued that Western culture tends to link the notions of violence and truth.[11] To back up this hypothesis we may turn to religion and think of the crucifixion and other incidents of martyrdom or we may turn to radical political thinking and consider its strong insistence on the revolutionary moment. It is almost as if truth can only manifest itself in moments of violence and crisis. In twentieth-century French thought, I would argue that a certain reading of Hegel and Marx has been decisive in articulating the relationship between violence, creativity, subjectivity and truth. Two names deserve particular mention in this regard.

The first is Georges Sorel. In his *Réflexions sur la violence* (originally published as a feuilleton in 1906) violence is presented as a socially creative force; it becomes the motor for constituting a society with true ethical values. According to Sorel, Marx was partially mistaken when he believed that capitalism had produced its own gravedigger in the form of the proletarian. In 1906 modern capitalism no longer maintained a clear opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The bourgeoisie was getting increasingly depraved and the proletarians had seen their living standards improve sufficiently for them to lose their revolutionary aspirations. In short, decadence had seized both classes and class-struggle and revolution no longer seemed imminent.

Sorel's solution was to introduce violence. Violence (which in Sorel equates to the idea of the General Strike) would re-establish the separation between counter-revolutionaries and revolutionaries and thereby pave the way for revolutionary action and the creation of a truly ethical society.

The other name is that of Alexandre Kojève, whose famous lectures on Hegel between 1933 and 1939 were published as the *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (1947). If Sorel focused on one aspect of Marx's philosophy (the class-struggle), Kojève was equally specific in his approach to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: he chose the discussion of the master–slave dialectic. According to Kojève, this section not only described a founding moment for the advent of a 'self-consciousness in and for itself' but also, in a much more anthropological and existential sense, the emergence and constitution of human subjectivity in the experience of a struggle for life or death. Kojève explained that only in so far as man was willing to risk his life in a struggle for recognition ('a struggle for pure prestige', as he termed it) could he become truly human. Thus the struggle for life and death (and the violence which necessarily accompanied it) became the foundational human experience. Kojève's reading also operated on a social level: the struggle for pure prestige could take the form of revolutionary action. Thus Kojève reached a similar conclusion to Sorel in suggesting that man should go through a period of revolutionary action in order to bring about a new and true society where the distinction between masters and slaves would no longer be effective.[12]

The Sorel–Kojève tradition was tremendously influential in the inter-war period (and beyond). One can find echoes of this tradition in writings by authors such as Georges Bataille, André Breton, Maurice Blanchot, Roger Caillois, Jean-Paul Sartre and others.[13] This is not to imply that these writers always developed within this tradition (on the contrary, some of them were among the first to realize the dangers of this tradition) but at different stages in their lives they were all indebted to it. In their co-directed project *Contre-Attaque* (1935), Bataille and Breton explicitly advocated the idea of a socially constitutive violence; Maurice Blanchot was, as the title indicates, on Sorelian territory in his (in)famous article about terrorism as a means to public salvation ('Le terrorisme, méthode de salut public' (1936)); and Caillois followed the example of Blanchot (and Sorel) when he chose a related title for his article of 1937, 'L'aggressivité comme valeur'. As for Sartre, his notorious preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) although explicitly polemicizing against the

'fascist nonsense of Sorel' was, as Hannah Arendt has carefully shown, very much in the Sorelian tradition.[14]

In her critique of Sartre, Arendt not only demonstrates his indebtedness to the Sorelian tradition, she also outlines an analysis of this tradition. According to Arendt, Hegel's argument about man creating himself through thought (or *Bildung* to be more precise) had undergone a remarkable change since the early nineteenth century. First Marx replaced *Bildung* by the materialist concept of work and then Sartre (and others before him, we might add) replaced work by the concept of violence. So even if Sartre considers himself a Marxist he is in fact (according to Arendt) as far as possible from Marx:

> though one may argue that all notions of man creating himself have in common a rebellion against the very factuality of human condition (...) it cannot be denied that a gulf separates the essentially peaceful activities of thinking and labouring from all deeds of violence.[15]

At the heart of this tradition lies the idea of an individual (and a community) revealing itself to itself in moments of violence. In this theory violence becomes a phenomenon of singular epistemological and existential importance. Of course this does not mean that any act of violence will be intimately connected to truth, but it does mean that the capacity to distinguish between creative (violent) ruptures and untruthful acts of violence becomes crucial.[16]

I will argue that reading *I Can't Sleep* in the context of this tradition allows for a stronger interpretation of the film. Claire Denis does not take the theoretical path offered by this philosophico-political tradition, since she is precisely placing violence in a position where it has no epistemological or existential pre-eminence. Of course, Camille's actions do say something about Western society (they speak to the alienation in Western societies) and Denis certainly does not imply that violence should not be scrutinized. But at the same time she effectively distances herself from this fascination with violence which can be found not only in many serial-killer films from the 1990s but also among some the most prominent thinkers in the twentieth century. Without reducing or fully explaining the violence, she takes away the mysterious attraction it often holds and thereby gives to the character of Camille all the desolation and sadness that he possesses.

The film thus manages to say two different things at the same time: on the one hand it is a description of 'the time of broken ties'.[17] Denis choses to focus on those who have become marginalized in contemporary society, she establishes the contours for a sociological

reading of the film. On the other hand it is a film which uses dedramatization, opacity and a multi-plot structure to disconnect the notions of truth and violence. Considering the overall de-valorization of conflicts it seems reasonable to conclude that instead of trying to produce a feeling of rebellion in her viewers, Denis invites us to look beyond the ideal of (productive) struggle when trying to deal with problems in the contemporary Western metropolis.

In these parts of her work Denis follows a direction indicated by the late Roland Barthes. Let us consider his 1978 interview, 'On the Subject of Violence'. The end of the interview is particularly interesting. In a couple of brief answers Barthes first expresses his reservations about what he calls the 'philosophies of collectivity', and he then goes on to recommend the rehabilitation of 'more individualist positions'. Only by moving away from the philosophical and political ideology of collectivity will it be possible to create a society in which violence does not play a key part. It may seem scandalous, he continues, but maybe:

> singularity itself should be assumed (and) effectively reconsidered in a philosophy of the subject. One shouldn't be intimidated by this morality of the collective superego, so widespread in our culture with its values of responsibility and political engagement.[18]

The interviewer (Jacqueline Sers) then objects that she cannot see why this should seem scandalous and Barthes replies: 'I assure you, it's a scandal for every thought and theory since Hegel!'

In these reflections Barthes expresses his resistance to a range of ideas that suggest an intrinsic link between conflict, creativity and community: the idea that the creation of a true community necessitates a violent overcoming of existing social oppositions; the idea that only conflicts and oppositions will reveal new knowledge; and the idea that man becomes what he truly is by struggling against that which and those in whom he does not believe. All these ideas appear to irritate the late Barthes. In texts like *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977) and the seminars given 1977–8 on *Le Neutre* and *Comment vivre ensemble* he is precisely engaged in an ambitious attempt to rethink desire and community in ways that set him apart from what he describes as the Hegelian tradition. In other words, the Hegelian ideal of recognition does not seem to be a solution to the problems of mutual co-existence; on the contrary this ideal is part of the problem since it will force the individual into a state of perpetual struggle.

There is no doubt that Barthes's *fatigue* with the French Hegelian tradition has relevance for the analysis of key aspects of Claire Denis's films. *I Can't Sleep* could be considered as an investigation into the 'more individualist positions' in a time of broken ties. In this film about alienation and serial killing Denis does not depict (or inspire) feelings of anger and revolt, but instead uses a thorough dedramatization to investigate the possiblities of alternative logics of inter-subjectivity. She does not set the scene for new struggles for recognition but gently invites us to look for other solutions. Thus the above-mentioned slow-motion sequence of the accidental touch of hands (the only slow-motion sequence in the film) was precisely a step outside the sphere of recognition (and into one of 'grace'?): the hands belong to two individuals who remain acutely aware of the insurmountable distance that separates them but these individuals nevertheless share a moment of tenderness. This scene is all the more significant in that Denis's *Friday Night* (2002), a film about two strangers sharing a night during the Paris transit strike in 1995, could be considered as a feature-length exploration of precisely that moment.

If Denis's film can be said to challenge a certain Hegelian tradition it is therefore not only because it (partly) eludes a logic of recognition by refraining from establishing dialectical relations between its characters, but also because of the very subtle decoupling of truth and violence and the overall de-valorization of conflict. What one critic described as Denis's intellectual cowardice and her refusal to engage with the characters in an ethical way should rather be seen as a sign of extreme courage in the interests of a delicate exploration of the relations between subjectivity, conflict and community. The film is far from triumphant: the dedramatization of social relations appears as a very difficult task, but *I Can't Sleep* nevertheless attempts to undermine the ideals of the social struggle by pointing to the moments where individuals co-exist without taking part in necessarily conflictual relations.

NOTES

1 *The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* is the subtitle of Axel Honneth's 1992 book on *The Struggle for Recognition*. The reference to Honneth is meant to indicate that this first approach situates Denis's films within a socio-political reading of the Hegelian concept of recognition. I will return to this concept later in the text.

2 Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004), 132.

3 Rob White, 'Forms of Beauty: moving beyond desire in Bersani/Duthoit and *Beau Travail*', *Journal of European Studies* 34:1/2 (2004), 128–42. Forbes Morlock, 'Solid Cinema — Claire Denis's strange solidarities', *Journal of European Studies* 34:1/2 (2004), 82–91.

4 Thierry Jousse & Frédéric Strauss, 'Entretien avec Claire Denis', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 479–80 (1994), 26.

5 Thierry Jousse, 'Les insomniaques', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 479–80 (1994), 22.

6 In Deborah S. Reisinger, 'Murder and Banality in the Contemporary Fait Divers', *South Central Review* 17:4 (2000), 95.

7 Other tender (and mainly speechless) moments could for instance include: Théo and his son sleeping together on the roof, Daïga and her patronne drinking and dancing and Théo and his band in concert.

8 The last third of the film shows a radical process of self-negation: a family destroys all their belongings and finally commits collective suicide.

9 Indeed, one of the valuable findings in Honneth's book (*The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*) is the distinction between different struggles for recognition. We may for instance distinguish between a psychologically formative struggle for recognition between a child and its parents and a sociologically formative struggle between legal subjects.

10 Jean Baudrillard is one of the recurrent theorists in the critical writing on *I Can't Sleep*. There is a very good reason for this: Denis has explained that Baudrillard's writings and interviews on the Thierry Paulin affair was among the sources for the film.

11 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Au fond des images* (Paris, Galilée, 2003), 35–56.

12 It may be added that a particular reading of Freud also played an important part in this tradition. In Freudian psychoanalysis conflict and revolt play a key role. Without the oedipal revolt against the Father, the subject cannot constitute itself as an independent being. And furthermore: in the famous myth about the constitution of a community of brothers (in *Totem und Tabu*) Freud uses this theory of oedipal revolt sociologically: a true community becomes possible only after an act of revolt against the tyrannical father. (The list of names having influenced this tradition is of course much longer: Sade and Nietzsche should be among the first to be added).

13 Re-entering the field of French film, I would argue that the provocative character of a film like Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl* (*A ma sœur!*, 2001) comes from the fact that the final rape scene places Breillat within this tradition. As Ginette Vincendeau writes: 'While only the most narrow political correctness would argue that Breillat condones rape here, her suggestion that to be raped is a potentially liberating experience stretches credibility, to say the least' (Ginette Vincendeau, 'Sisters, Sex and Sitcom', *Sight and sound* 11:12 (2001), 20).

14 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations V* (Paris, Gallimard, 1964), 175.

15 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 13.

16 The capacity to distinguish between productive and unproductive violence is not only the primary concern of the abovementioned text by Jean-Luc Nancy but also a key question in the *Ethics* of Alain Badiou. In this book Badiou defines (one version of) evilness as 'a simulacrum of truth'. See Alain Badiou, *L'éthique — essai sur la conscience du Mal* (Paris, Hatier, 1993), 68). For Badiou, Hitler's national-socialist revolution was a travesty of a popular revolution.

17 *Le temps du lien défait* (written and performed by Jean-Louis Murat) is one of the many fine tunes on the soundtrack.

18 Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, translated by Linda Coverdale (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1991), 306–11.