

Douglas Morrey

## Textures of Terror: Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day*

'...first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged [...] If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is - infinite.'- William Blake, "'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'"

'The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.'- H. P. Lovecraft, "'The Call of Cthulu'"

The recent work of the French film director Claire Denis has suggested on more than one occasion a certain knowing manipulation of favourite themes and tropes within film theory. In particular, Denis has demonstrated a capacity to revisit generic narratives apparently exhausted by theoretical explication, and to re-invest them with their full and magnificent strangeness. *Beau travail* (2000) appeared to be a classic homosocial narrative of the kind analysed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men*, with Denis showing how the latent homosexual desires within the French Foreign Legion were displaced into rivalry and violence. But this was not the end point of Denis's analysis, as it might have been in a piece of psychoanalytic film criticism, rather this was merely the point of departure for the film. In actual fact, the homoerotic 'subtext' of *Beau travail* is so obvious and so close to the surface as to be altogether uninteresting. As Stéphane Bouquet points out, the film is entirely without complex in its representation of male-male desire (Bouquet 2000: 49). Instead, the interest of the film lies in the fascinated gaze with which the camera watches these men's bodies in action. A certain school of film theory might argue that these masculine bodies are 'feminised' by the camera's gaze since they become spectacle, and are drawn as objects of desire. But this is not necessarily the case, since Denis seems fascinated not only by their beauty but by their potency and power, and indeed by what Bouquet calls 'la puissance du désir' ('the power of desire') (: 49) for which gender is arguably all but irrelevant.

A similar play with over-coded generic narratives is at work, I will argue, in Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001). In this film, an American doctor, Shane Brown (Vincent Gallo) comes to Paris on honeymoon with his bride June (Tricia Vessey) but has an ulterior motive for the visit. Shane is searching for his disgraced French colleague, Dr Léo Semeneau (Alex Descas), shunned by the scientific community ever since his experiments in deepest Guyana went mysteriously wrong. Léo's partner Coré (Béatrice Dalle) now suffers from a strange disease which necessitates her imprisonment at home since, whenever she gets out, she preys on men, literally devouring them. Shane, we discover over the course of the film, is beginning to experience similar carnivorous urges towards women. Following the widely-admired *Beau travail*, the preposterous generic synopsis of *Trouble Every Day* was regarded in many quarters as a serious lapse in Denis's quality control, as though the horror genre were somehow beneath her. Worse, critics accused Denis of buying into the worst clichés of the horror genre without providing the excitement that goes along

with it: it was difficult to care about such sketchily drawn characters, reviewers suggested, even when they did meet with a gruesome fate (Williamson 2003).

But what is interesting about *Trouble Every Day* is precisely the way that Denis plays with a genre that has become over-familiar, both through formulaic repetition and through theoretical interpretation, and thereby ceased to reserve any surprises for its audience. The horror genre has become the object of a major theoretical discourse which developed initially around the literary Gothic before spreading to the cinematic incarnations of terror. As Fred Botting shows, the genre was quickly appropriated by a very traditional kind of psychoanalytic criticism before becoming the willing plaything of successive trends in theory from feminism and post-structuralism to post-colonialism and queer theory (Botting 1996: 18-20). A number of the central tenets of the genre and its attendant theory are knowingly evoked by Denis in *Trouble Every Day*. For instance, the narrative device of a woman whose antisocial appetites necessitate her enclosure within a large, shuttered mansion inevitably recalls the 'madwoman in the attic' of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and its feminist interpretation.

But mostly, in their desire to devour the opposite sex, Shane and Coré resemble that most over-determined of generic figures, the vampire. Although the word is never mentioned in the film, a number of discreet references are made to the conventions of the vampire movie: the blood smeared around Coré's mouth after a kill; the camera that, from Shane's point of view, lingers in close-up on the neck of a chambermaid; a bite mark glimpsed on the upper arm of Shane's young bride; Shane's complaint about the bright lights in a laboratory; a shot in which Coré raises her coat like bat-wings behind her shoulders as she gulps the night air; and, finally, in the film's one concession to genre that comes across as a little facile, Coré's body consumed by flames after her death. The vampire, of course, is a great favourite of theory, and has become a kind of universal shorthand for what Botting calls 'the dangerous doubleness of sexuality' (: 145). And such became the instant interpretation of *Trouble Every Day*, James Williamson in *Sight and Sound* describing the film as a question of 'what happens if one's lover possesses other, deeper and impossible desires' (Williamson 2003: 56).

The vampire's transgressing of bodily boundaries and troubling of fixed gender roles has made him - or indeed her - into a kind of blank canvas over which theory (particularly psychoanalytic theory) is able to write any meaning it chooses. Thus for instance, vampirism signifies aggressive female sexuality in the form of lesbianism, but it also signifies female victimhood; it evokes the sexual initiations of menstruation and defloration; it signifies oral sex at the same time as it signifies castration; meanwhile, the blood sucked by the vampire is menstrual blood but it is also semen, and milk...(all examples taken from Creed 1993: 59-72). There is a kind of hysterical slippage of concepts here, in which the real, material object of horror is lost or remains unaddressed, a collection of predictable psychoanalytic narratives ultimately serving only to dull or mask the fear. As Cynthia Freeland remarks, the true scope of the vampire's terror, as 'a violation of nature's categories, a thing that causes revulsion and disgust' has been reduced, so that he or she is now primarily identified as 'a sexual threat' (Freeland 2000: 143).

If *Trouble Every Day* is somehow able to avoid this fate, to resist its immediate annexation by an all-consuming theoretical discourse, it is because the film appeals

discreetly to generic conventions without ever allowing itself to be claimed by the genre with its full iconographic and ideological implications. The film, as it were, references a tradition of vampire cinema, but without ever quite 'coming out' as a vampire movie. As Sébastien Chauvin has written about the film, 'Le genre (...) passe toujours en douceur, jamais aux forceps, il s'infiltré comme un mal étrange au coeur de la fiction' ('Genre is smuggled rather than forced into the film, infiltrating the story like a strange sickness') (Chauvin 2001: 76). Elsewhere, though, Denis makes blatant, almost mocking references to genre, as though to dispense with her generic obligations in one fell swoop before moving on to what really interests her: the textures of the material world. Such would seem to be the role of the sequence in which Shane and June visit the cathedral of Notre-Dame. The scene invokes a whole tradition of Gothic art, with its close-ups of gargoyles and Vincent Gallo's comic impersonations of Boris Karloff's Frankenstein and Max Schreck's Nosferatu, but the real interest of the sequence is elsewhere. It is in the rich, forest-green scarf worn by June and dropped from the belltower: it is in the effect of this singular patch of colour against the pervasive grey of the cathedral stone, Shane's overcoat and the surrounding Parisian panorama. The camera cuts quickly away from Gallo and the gargoyles, but lingers at length on the folds of this fabric as it flutters and floats across the rooftops.

Aside from brief hints and iconographic clues like those mentioned above, *Trouble Every Day* might be described as a horror film that doesn't act like one. The typical horror narrative proceeds through a build-up of suspense, with a regular provision of shocks gradually gathering pace towards a climax. Denis's film on the other hand is striking for its absence of suspense, a quality that saw it condemned as 'lacklustre' in certain quarters (Williamson 2003: 56). The film never departs from its unhurried, even pace and carries a kind of neutral, matter-of-fact tone throughout. In this, *Trouble* is similar to Denis's earlier incursion into the genre of the crime thriller in *J'ai pas sommeil* (1993). Here, too, the absence of suspense means that the murders, when they finally arrive, take by surprise the spectator who has all but forgotten she is watching a thriller (Marker 1999: 146).

For a horror movie, *Trouble Every Day* is a remarkably quiet, still film. Its palette, as I have already suggested, is made up largely of slate greys and eggshell blues, several scenes taking place in purple dawns or the half-light of dusk. The music, by Tindersticks with whom Denis worked on *Nenette et Boni* (1996), is sparse and sombre, built around mournful piano lines, muted trumpets and infrequent bass notes. Denis's use of stars further illustrates her ability to exploit an audience's expectations without pandering to them. She makes full use of Vincent Gallo's sharp, angular and vaguely lupine features, together with his grimly unsmiling demeanour, but she evacuates the motor-mouth screen presence seen in *Buffalo '66* (1997) and the relentless self-mythologising that has become Gallo's stock-in-trade. Similarly, *Trouble Every Day* builds on the type-casting of Béatrice Dalle as a woman whose predatory and unstable sexual appetite ultimately leads to her (self-)destruction, but it eliminates the typical examples of star behaviour that characterise films such as *370 2 le matin* (1986), *A la folie* (1994) or even, to some extent, *J'ai pas sommeil*, in which Dalle briefly reprises her role as Betty Blue by throwing her lover's belongings from a balcony. In *Trouble*, Dalle is given only a single line of dialogue, her voice a barely recognisable croak as she utters: 'J'en peux plus, je veux mourir' ('I can't go on, I want to die').

Throughout the film, Denis's camera roams restlessly over surfaces, fascinated by texture and contour, from the dawn light rippling over the Seine at the beginning of the film to the grasses waving under the orange sodium lamps of a patch of suburban wasteland as Coré makes her latest kill. Bodies are filmed in much the same way as these landscapes, as in a love scene between Shane and his wife, in which the camera travels in extreme close-up over the skin, such that it is difficult to ascribe ownership to the limbs and flesh on view as the hands explore recesses on the surface of the bodies. There is a fascination, too, with fabrics, as in the example of the green scarf at Notre-Dame. When the Browns first arrive in Paris, Denis watches as June helps the chambermaid to make up the bed, with no sound to fill the silence but the rustling of starched sheets. The tension that is generally absent from more sensational areas of the film is somehow contained within these folds of linen, the layers of whiteness that take over the screen between the blank white wall, June's white dress and the newly-made bed. In this film of surfaces, there is no psychology (a trait condemned, as we saw, by certain critics). Perhaps the only real 'psychological' shot in the film comes in the plane en route to Paris, where Shane fantasises an image of his wife covered in blood. But, here again, the interest lies less in the narrative meaning of the fantasy, (we will never know, for instance, whether this is June's blood or someone else's), or even in its status as fantasy, than in the sensuality of the image, the eagerness with which the handheld camera traces the outline of June's body, examining the way the blood collects in rivulets between her shoulder blades and exploring the deep red folds of the material that gathers between her legs. This predilection for the pleats and wrinkles of tissue and fabric may be interpreted, I suggest, through an appeal to Deleuze's notion of the fold in his study of the baroque. Following Leibniz, Deleuze argues that matter is infinitely divisible, but not into discrete points on a linear scale: rather matter divides into folds within folds (Deleuze 1988: 7-9). The formation of organisms is considerably more probable, Deleuze suggests, if it is conceived as a kind of infolding through a series of intermediary states of matter, rather than through the division of matter into an infinite series of independent points (: 10). This conception allows Deleuze to create a picture of matter teeming with life: 'Il n'y a pas seulement du vivant partout,' he writes, 'mais des âmes partout dans la matière' ('Not only is there life everywhere, but there are souls scattered throughout matter') (: 16-17), since each fold is the site of a monad expressing a unique point of view on the world, or, better, the condition under which a subject may come to invest and actualise such a point of view (27). Borrowing an image from Leibniz, Deleuze describes matter as a kind of pond alive with currents and vortexes (: 8).

I want to suggest that this extraordinarily fertile conception of matter, this conception of matter as extraordinarily fertile, could be used to characterise the world of *Trouble Every Day*. Consider, for example, the scenes of horror which, when they arrive in Denis's film, are filmed in much the same way as everything else, with the camera roving slowly in close-up over the bodies of killer and victim. But these are not the sensational, exploitative close-ups of splatter movies: rather there is a kind of detached fascination, almost a clinical gaze to these scenes. When Coré welcomes an eager young trespasser into her room, the camera travels at length over the expanse of his torso, suddenly become strange and immense: his hairs twitch and flutter like the grasses on the wasteland earlier; mysterious ridges are discovered on his body like the surface of the moon; dark moles appear like planets within this uncharted solar system, gravitating around the shocking black

hole of his navel. When the boy's erotic encounter turns into something indescribably horrible, Denis refuses to relent from this cool, constant gaze as Coré feeds hungrily on his bloodied features and playfully explores the new orifices she has opened on his body. The spectator's revulsion before this scene, I suggest, has little to do with character identification (since the boy has no psychological density) or with primal fantasies of castrating women; the horror lies instead within the film's exploration of the flesh in all its unfamiliar materiality, as a phenomenological object that is beyond metaphorization.

This scene is strikingly different from traditional cinematic horror, and certainly from conventional vampire movies. There, too, the slaughter usually follows a seduction, but the emphasis tends to be placed on the erotic tease, with the moment of death often reduced to a single scream, or even an orgasmic gasp. Here, on the other hand, we are not spared the extended agony of the boy's strangled yelps and gurgled screams. Carol Clover has noted the surprising rarity with which actual scenes of rape figure in the horror genre, as though, despite repeatedly hinting at the flimsy dividing line between sexual desire and violence, these films were ultimately reluctant to show that boundary being crossed (Clover 1992: 29). This is evidently not the case in *Trouble Every Day*, even less so in the later scene in which Shane kills the chambermaid, where what begins as a borderline-consensual sex act ends as a horrific and unambiguous violation.

In thinking about the horrors of *Trouble Every Day*, I have been guided by what may be a rather surprising model: Michel Houellebecq's monograph on H. P. Lovecraft. Here, too, horror is to be found not in the mind, but in matter, in the material world. Like other horror writers, Lovecraft posits fantastical creatures existing beyond the edges of our perception, but, says Houellebecq, these are not spiritual entities but material ones. Houellebecq writes: 'Il n'est plus question de croire ou de ne pas croire, comme dans les histoires de vampires et de loups-garous; il n'y a pas de réinterprétation possible, pas d'échappatoire. Aucun fantastique n'est moins psychologique, moins discutabile' ('It is no longer a question of believing or not believing, as in stories of vampires and werewolves; there is no other possible explanation for the horror, no easy way out. Never has the fantastic been less psychological, less open to argument') (Houellebecq 1999: 39). There is, in other words, a vaster and more mysterious universe than our limited imaginations can encompass, a world contained within the fantastical geometry and infernal architecture of Lovecraft's fiction. By the same token, Deleuze reminds us that the straight line and infinite series of rational thought is denounced by the irrational numbers of baroque mathematics which show this false infinity to be full of holes concealing unnumbered labyrinths (Deleuze 1988: 24). Deleuze has long fought against the psychoanalytic tendency to interpret our terrors and fantasies from within the very limited stage of the heterosexual nuclear family. There is, after all, so much more to be afraid of. Deleuze and Guattari remind us of the way evolution proceeds, not in a logical sequence, but through a series of cross-species leaps (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 69-70), an observation that is perhaps not without its relevance to *Trouble Every Day*.

I am not, of course, suggesting that matter is somehow *necessarily* frightening and nor am I denying the existence or the efficacy of a certain psychological horror. However, by routinely giving psychological - and only psychological - explanations of terror, we risk missing the true interpenetration of mind and matter that

constitutes our experience of the world. It is this inter-leaving, this folding together of mind and matter, body and soul that is the ultimate subject of Deleuze's book on the baroque, an extension of the Bergsonian influence in Deleuze's work whereby our relation to the world is conceived as a combination of or compromise between a *pure perception* existing in matter, and a pure memory existing in the mind. By focusing on the material horrors of *Trouble Every Day*, I have sought merely to redress the balance away from a purely psychological or psychoanalytic interpretation of terror. The danger of any theory based on sexuality (such as that which has colonised the horror genre over the past twenty-five years or so) is that it tends to elevate desire into a new form of truth. But, as Jean-François Lyotard reminds us in his most challenging work, the indeterminability, the ungraspability of desire, even if it provides the greatest defence against the terrors of totalitarianism, is not, in itself, friendly or fun: as Lyotard writes, 'il n'est pas question de la rendre aimable' ('there's no question of making it loveable') (Lyotard 1974: 304). Horror is often interpreted as a means for us to come to terms with the disturbing nature of our psychological reality, as in recent vampire movies which serve only to add an extra *frisson* of danger to the representation of sexuality. But for Denis, I suggest, as for H. P. Lovecraft, there will be no coming to terms: the horror is not only something within us to be recognised and tamed; it is also all around us, in the ungraspable totality of matter against which the mind must struggle to define itself.

---

## References

- Botting, F. (1996), *Gothic*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Bouquet, S. (2000), "'La hiérarchie des anges'", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 545, pp. 48-9.
- Clover, C. J. (1992), *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, London: BFI.
- Creed, B. (1993), *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. (1988), *Le Pli: Leibniz et le Baroque*, Paris: Minuit.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1980), *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, Paris: Minuit.
- Freeland, C. A. (2000), *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Houellebecq, M. (1999 [1991]), *H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie*, Paris, Editions du Rocher.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1974), *Economie libidinale*, Paris: Minuit.
- Marker, C. (1999), "'Sleepless in Paris: J'ai pas sommeil" (Denis, 1993)', in Phil Powrie (ed.), *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 137-147.
- Williamson, J. (2003), '*Trouble Every Day*', *Sight & Sound*, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 56.

