

**STEALTH KILLERS: RETHINKING  
THE NOTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT  
WITH CLAIRE DENIS' *I CAN'T SLEEP***

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*I Can't Sleep* (*J'ai Pas Sommeil*, 1994) closely follows a group of loosely connected characters in Paris whose paths cross in a story about a serial killer who ruthlessly murders old ladies in their apartments. French director Claire Denis wrote the script, which features a transvestite grappling with HIV and drug addiction, in response to the sensationalist news coverage and public uproar unleashed by a series of murders committed by the popular dancer Thierry Paulin, a native of Martinique.<sup>1</sup> Front page news for a year and a half, the story suddenly died, vanished out of sight, and became as "silenced and invisible" as the victims of the crimes themselves.<sup>2</sup> In interviews, Denis frequently refers to Jean Baudrillard's question: how is it possible that the killer and his accomplice "were erased from the French landscape only because they were in jail. They have raised so many questions—even the worst questions?"<sup>3</sup> *I Can't Sleep* evolves from a controversial subject—a gay, black, HIV-positive serial killer who has been constructed as a monster—and according to Denis, the question of "political correctness" was always present during the making of the film.<sup>4</sup> She addresses the representational problems she faces partly by shifting attention away from the main character, Camille, and the murders he commits, in a double movement of decentralization and deferral. Instead, she approaches Camille somewhat obliquely through the persons, places, and things in his immediate environment.

*I Can't Sleep* developed out of a close examination of the narrative space produced in the wake of a series of horrific

events and presents a fictional refiguration of this space. The structure of the film suggests that the murders cannot be reduced to the deeds of an individual. Rather, they are embedded into the environment in which they occur and, in a sense, can be described as an environmental catastrophe. From this perspective, *I Can't Sleep* provides a compelling starting point for this essay, written at a time when polar vortexes, hurricanes, and heat waves shake up conceptions of "the natural," and anthropogenic climate change takes center stage. An often-evoked image within current debates about ecology is that nature is not an Other, something "over there," outside of us, that we are not a part of.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, thinking about how people's relationship with nature is expressed and refracted by film and in cinema seems most pertinent in films that don't deal with environmental issues per se, such as *I Can't Sleep*. Denis' cinematic inquiries into controversial subjects are deeply ethical in the sense that they do not appropriate the places, stories, and people they depict. They address persons and situations caught in the visible or invisible crises that haunt the present, but do so without claiming privileged access to them.

In this essay, I consider how *I Can't Sleep* operates structurally, and how it formulates a critique by way of description; then, I move on to engaging the film as a test site to challenge narrow understandings of environmental crisis that exist both within and outside of academia.

Denis and co-writer Jean-Pol Fargeau started with the question, "What is it to be the brother, or the mother, or the neighbor of a monster?"<sup>6</sup> Thus they brought the killer from the "over there" of front-page news and prison cell back to his Parisian neighborhood. But if *I Can't Sleep* sets out to narrow the gap between self and other, it never pretends to be fully able to do so. The cinematography oscillates between proximity and distance; the film's characters stay impenetrable regardless of whether they turn their face to the camera or show their back. Most of cinematographer Agnes Godard's shots in *I Can't Sleep* are medium shots and close ups. The characters are framed tightly and positioned deliberately so as to suggest, and then reformulate relationships.

The film undercuts the representational logic of classical cinematic narratives by unfolding slowly in a mosaic of observation and chance encounters. Camille's story is not explicated, but rather approximated through the parallel stories of Daïga, a young Lithuanian woman who arrives in Paris in a run-down car that marks her foreignness, searching in vain for an acting career, and Theo, Camille's brother, a musician making do as a carpenter who fights with his wife Mona about returning to Martinique with their young son. Owning nothing but a couple of suitcases stuffed with clothes, cigarettes, and cans of caviar, Daïga is handed through the Slavic community until she's taken in as a cleaner by Ninon, who runs the hotel where Camille lives with his boyfriend. Daïga's and Theo's stories are more developed in the conventional sense in that they are both structured around a conflict: in Daïga's case around a theater director's false promises, and in Theo's case, around the irreconcilable disagreement with Mona about whether to give up their life in France. Repeated shots of *Sacre Coeur* anchor the story in the 18<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris, a neighborhood the film introduces as populated by diverse ethnicities, flows of tourists, and swarms of policemen, and characterized by its crumbling historic charm as much as its modern city flair.

Both Theo and Daïga are observers and, one could say, stand in for the director. Theo is disturbed by his neighbor's nightly crying and tries to figure out what's going on. Through Daïga we get a close look at some of Camille's personal things, including his suits, paintings and photographs of himself and his family. "Even when you read reports of the trial, in such cases, the opacity remains," Denis commented on her research, "and it is through the bystanders—witnesses, policemen, and most importantly the family that the criminal is discussed."<sup>7</sup> But it's not only through their observations or interactions with Camille; it is also through Daïga and Theo's characters themselves that we learn vicariously about him. The discrimination and daily racism they endure, for instance, add facets to the image of Camille that forms in the course of the film. Similarly, Daïga's aunt stands in for the victims, who themselves remain unknown.

Camille is mostly shown drifting through various situations, a “floating body”; in permanent transit, he rarely settles down.<sup>8</sup> We see him among friends and acquaintances, at his mother’s birthday party, or crashing at his brother’s, passing through situations that show him as someone at different times acting tender, passive-aggressive, or violent. The camera’s gaze following Camille is made palpable throughout the film. From scanning his body or tracking his movement it oftentimes seamlessly segues into a point-of-view shot. For example, in an often-discussed sequence, the camera lingers over Camille’s body, settles on his face hidden under the cushion, and reveals in the next shot that this is the point of view of his nephew Harry.<sup>9</sup>

In an article published shortly after *I Can’t Sleep* premiered at Cannes Film Festival in 1994, Thierry Jousse writes, “What the director is interested in, is what the camera records literally, that is to say a mixture of gesture and thought, something that is purely exterior and invisible at the same time.”<sup>10</sup> This interplay of something expressive and something inscrutable, something that is legible and illegible at the same time, is crucial for the type of description Denis offers in *I Can’t Sleep*. Charged with a gesture and a thought, every shot tells a story that is at once literal and removed. In one sequence, for instance, one can see Camille pay for a dinner with friends, laying out hard currency center frame. Then, the camera moves up to show his friend/lover, who secretly handed him a wad of money earlier in the film, thus introducing a completely different economy that destabilizes the possible meaning of the shot.

Denis has described the film’s structure as a mosaic. The image of a mosaic also implies something about the sensation or picture that the film produces as a whole. The shots and sequences that form the pieces of this mosaic don’t occupy a pre-determined space like pieces in a puzzle, and even though they provide clues they don’t function like factual pieces of evidence. As a result, observation is privileged over explanation, and Denis avoids the pre-eminent stance that often seeps into an assumed critical distance. In keeping her characters opaque, she acknowledges that—just as the viewer—she can never fully know

them. In light of Denis’ statement that the director has a moral obligation not to betray her characters, this reticence becomes a gesture of respect.<sup>11</sup>

*I Can’t Sleep* is interspersed with the sound of radio announcements warning elderly Parisian women to beware of the murderer who enters apartments, taking the valuables and the lives of old ladies residing alone. Although silent and unseen, the killer lives vividly in the public mind—a fear-inducing, bodiless entity. It’s not until more than halfway through the film that Camille is revealed as the “killer of old ladies,” and two consecutive murders stand in for the serial killings. “These scenes forbid editing,” Denis has said about the depiction of the murders, which are shot in a single, full view. “Otherwise,” she writes, “it would be disgusting, and not very moral, to embellish the crimes.”<sup>12</sup>

The script for *I Can’t Sleep* situates the story in “the hottest summer ever.”<sup>13</sup> Although the weather suddenly turned “cold as winter,” and even the wardrobe had to be changed once shooting began in July 1993, the atmosphere of a city that offers no escape still permeates the film.<sup>14</sup> In fact, weather forecasts had predicted a heat wave in France that summer, and a scene with Theo and his family on the roof was originally based on the expected heat wave. In an interview shortly after the film’s release, Denis speaks about her desire for the heat wave as a documentary element that turns the city into a character—“un Paris étouffant,” oppressive and stifling.<sup>15</sup> But her description of people outside, touching, sitting in cafés, and watching each other also evokes a more romanticized image of a heat wave, and the heat wave Denis so desired was to serve a different purpose for her film than the one I bring into the picture here.

*I Can’t Sleep*’s description of an environment caught in the heat and the recurring radio broadcasts sending warnings and announcements of death bring to mind another environmental catastrophe that took place roughly a decade after the film was made—the deadly heat wave that hit Europe and, most brutally, France in August of 2003, where it took the lives of 15,000

people, mostly the elderly. Just like the story of the killer, the heat wave has long disappeared from the media landscape and faded from public consciousness. But the radio announcements in the film eerily resemble the bodiless voices of broadcasts in the summer of 2003, which reported rising numbers of elderly people dying alone in their apartments, unable to fight the heat. The description of the heat wave as a “stealth killer”<sup>16</sup> descending “silent and invisible ... on silenced and invisible people” also applies to the furtive killer Camille, who haunts Paris in *I Can't Sleep*.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to the young scientist's assertion in last year's blockbuster *World War Z*, I'm not suggesting that “*Mother Nature* is a serial killer.”<sup>18</sup> However, the concept of nature has indeed been under scrutiny in recent decades, and this paper emerges from a discursive environment invested in shifting anthropocentric perspectives in order to gather human and non-human participants in a collective beyond the modern divide. To a certain extent, putting a serial killer and a heat wave on equal footing thus presents a polemic as to what it could mean to decenter the subject. No matter how different in scale, in their unfolding, both of these events can be understood as environmental catastrophes that stem from systemic failures of modern Western societies. Although time forbids to explore the issue further, it is worth noting that there is yet another environmental crisis alluded to in the film. Suffering from HIV, the character Camille is in the grip of a stealth killer himself.

Eventually, the killer dies in prison, out of public view; the temperature falls and the bodies are buried. In both cases, the underlying problems are not attended to. Just as the story of the killer taken up by Denis, the catastrophic effects of the 2003 heat wave have raised pressing questions that have yet to be resolved. *I Can't Sleep* refrains from demonizing the killer and suggests that the shocking murders cannot be isolated from the environment in which they take place, but that they also cannot be fully explained by it. While the film avoids generalizing assumptions about the socio-cultural experiences of immigrants' lives in Paris, it immerses itself in the neighborhood of the 18<sup>th</sup>

arrondissement and traces (missing) links between persons, the city and, by extension, society. Camille's detachment from his actions is thus a central theme of the film. In one scene he is shown performing “*Le Lien Defait*” by the French musician Jean-Louis Murat. The lyrics say, “the bond is broken,” or in Denis words, “The link is cut, there is no more connection.”<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the killer's detachment resonates in the public's disengagement with the event, which is forgotten once the scandal dies off.

This disconnect is also echoed by the public's response to the heat wave: uproar and shock are replaced with calm and indifference after the heat cools. The horror, then, lies not just in the events themselves, but also in our contorted relationship with them—in missed connections that become apparent through the absence of care. No matter how brutal the murders or how senseless an event such as the 2003 heat wave, such occurrences cannot be neatly categorized, isolated, or explained away as natural evil or disaster. Rather, they have to be understood as arising from the failure to acknowledge the multiple ways in which natural and cultural forces affect, alter, and determine each other. Denis' statement about *I Can't Sleep*, “life is a story of connections—without them society will self-destruct,”<sup>20</sup> thus relates to events such as the heat wave as well. Even if the heat wave does not care, we have the responsibility to care about it as much as the aftermath it causes; the same is true for the serial killer.

What can be gained by entering into the chill, hard-boiled world of *I Can't Sleep* to emerge heat-drenched in Paris in 2003? This essay aims to create an environment in which to think with Denis' film rather than about it. Rather than a work to be analyzed and explained, her film becomes a springboard for further exploration. However, the serial killer depicted in *I Can't Sleep* and the 2003 heatwave are each situated within specific and complex circumstances, so drawing an analogy between them simply based on the fact that both have been framed and eventually forgotten as “Other” will only get so far and this proposal is not advocating to erase differences. Rather, I want to suggest that an experimental methodology can be extrapolated

from Denis' approach, which Martine Beugnet has described as a way of figuring "bodies reacting to familiar or foreign environments."<sup>21</sup> In the beginning of this paper I stated that *I Can't Sleep* presents a fictional refiguration of the narrative space produced in the wake a series of horrific events. The project I'm hoping to develop uses Denis' method of description in *I Can't Sleep* as an inspiration to compose a refiguration of the narrative space produced in the wake of an environmental catastrophe such as the 2003 heat wave. Anthropogenic climate change produces entities that are frightening and contested and that cannot be fully grasped; as heavily mediated events they warrant approach from a cinematic perspective.

## NOTES

1. Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 85. Paulin was arrested in 1987 in Paris and charged with the murder of 22 elderly women, all of whom had lived in his neighborhood, the 18th arrondissement. Paulin was HIV-positive and died in prison before his trial.
2. Patrick Lagadec, "Understanding the French 2003 Heat Wave Experience: Beyond The Heat, a Multi-Layered Challenge," *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 12, no. 4 (2004): 160-169.
3. Claire Denis, "Interview," by Jonathan Romney, *The Guardian*, June 28, 2000, <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,338784,00.html>. See also Jean Baudrillard, "Cool Killers," *Autrement* 104 (1989): 143-145.
4. Claire Denis, "Entretien Avec Claire Denis," by Thierry Jousse and Frédéric Strauss, *Cahiers du Cinema* 479 (1994): 25-30. See also "Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations," by Marc Reid, *Jump Cut* 40 (1996): 67-72. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC40folder/ClaireDenisInt.html>.
5. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).
6. Denis and Romney, "Interview," n. pag.
7. "Entretien Avec Claire Denis," 27. This translation is from Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, 95.
8. Nikolaj Lübecker, "The Dedramatization of Violence in Claire Denis' *I Can't Sleep*," *Paragraph* 30, no. 2 (2007): 25.
9. Janet Bergstrom, "Opacity in the Films of Claire Denis," in *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism*, ed. Tyler Stovall and Georges Van den Abbeele, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 67.

10. Thierry Jousse, "Les Insomniacs," *Cahiers du Cinema* 479 (1994): 22 (my translation).
11. Claire Denis, "Noir Désir," interview by Serge Kaganski, *Les Inrockuptibles* 57 (1994), quoted in: Bergstrom, "Opacity in the Films of Claire Denis," 2003.
12. Jousse and Strauss, "Entretien Avec Claire Denis," 27 (my translation).
13. Denis and Romney, "Interview," n. pag.
14. Ibid.
15. Jousse and Strauss, "Entretien Avec Claire Denis," 26, 28.
16. Lagadec, "Understanding the French 2003 Heat Wave Experience," 160.
17. Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 17. Klinenberg's analysis is frequently cited in the discussion of the 2003 heat wave in France.
18. *World War Z*, directed by Marc Foster (Paramount Pictures, 2013), DVD.
19. Claire Denis, "Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations," by Marc Reid, *Jump Cut* 40 (1996): 67-72.
20. Ibid. 70.
21. Martine Beugnet, quoted in "Foreign Bodies—The Films of Claire Denis," May 2011, *Arsenal Cinema*, <http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/arsenal-cinema/past-programs/single/article/2037/2804/archive/2010/october.html>.