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History as Ghost
in the Films of Sophie Bredier, Claire Denis, and Chantal Akerman

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Catherine Dana
Ph.D., Yale University, 1998

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Catherine Dana

Ghosts are supposed to be invisible. However, ghosts become ghosts only when they are visible. In the common language, seeing a ghost is to be able to distinguish something—usually a person— that cannot be visible in the real (a dead, most of the time). The artists I study are (or have been) confronted to something that in their lives has been hidden, concealed even and that they want to understand. Their artistic process starts with this individual quest—shown or not in their movies, but always motivated by what Jean-Paul Sartre calls "an extreme situation." Sophie Bredier, an adopted child, is looking for the reasons of her adoption in the Korea after the partition; Claire Denis has lived in colonized Africa until her adolescence and wonders what she knows of this mysterious time; Chantal Akerman's mother has been deported to Auschwitz but will not speak about it.

The three filmmakers aim first to discern, and make discernable to the spectators, something that in their lives has been silenced, perhaps lost. Their films however don't stop at this point. I will argue that the work of these artists is not necessarily aimed at revealing themselves as individuals but at revealing what in their own lives have made them artists, and *these* artists. For this purpose, in their works, Bredier, Denis and Akerman are aiming to reveal what has been hidden, while keeping, *at the same time*, its hidden character. I will show that this double character of the ghost (invisible and visible) is mirrored in the artistic process: the ghost is figure and action. It has both an esthetic and ethical role. Furthermore, it is since it is an artistic figure that the ghost can be action. Indeed, the filmmakers use the intrinsic qualities of the cinema, its ghostliness, to show, bear witness and transmit what is haunting them. The ghosts are therefore what allows the private quest to become a collective one.

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# Introduction

> It is impossible to see the Lumière films as a simple demonstration of new technology. Every gesture, expression, movement of wind or water is touched with mystery. This is not the mystery of the magic trick but the more disturbing, uncanny sensation of seeing movement fossilized for the first time. This uncanny effect was also very vividly present for the cinema's first spectators; the images' silence and lack of colour added to their ghostly atmosphere. Maxim Gorky's well known response to the Lumière films bear witness to this: « It is terrifying to watch but it is the movement of shadows … Curses and ghosts … that have cast whole cities into eternal sleep come to mind and you feel as though Merlin's vicious trick had ben played out before you"[1].

More than one hundred years after its birth, cinema is no longer considered as a "kingdom of shadows," however, because cinema "allows one to see a record of time[2]" and because it "brings back to life … anyone it has ever recorded," (Mulvey 2006, 18) it has kept the power to provoke uncanny sensations. Indeed, the past, the time elapsed materializes during each screening in the present. Dead stars or extras appear in front of the spectators in a ghostly fashion.

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[1] Laura Mulvey. *Death 24x a Second*. Stillness and the Moving Image (Reaktion Books, 2006) 36. See

[2] Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time. Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Harvard UP, 2002) 3.

> The presence of the past is also the presence of the body resurrected and these images can trigger, if only by association, questions that will seem imponderable: the nature of time, the fragility of human life and the boundary between time and death (Mulvey 2006, 53).

Sophie Bredier, Claire Denis and Chantal Akerman, the three filmmakers I have researched in this work, exploit this illusion of ghostliness attached to cinema to create ghosts.

Ghosts are supposed to be invisible. However, ghosts become ghosts only when they are visible. In the common language, seeing a ghost is to be able to distinguish something—usually a person— that cannot be visible in the real (a dead, most of the time). The artists I study are (or have been) confronted to something that in their lives has been hidden, concealed even and that they want to understand. Their artistic process starts with this individual quest—shown or not in their movies but always motivated by what Jean-Paul Sartre calls "an extreme situation." Sophie Bredier, an adopted child, is looking for the reasons of her adoption in the Korea after the partition; Claire Denis has lived in colonized Africa until her adolescence and wonders what she knows of this mysterious time; Chantal Akerman's mother has been deported to Auschwitz but will not speak about it.

The three filmmakers aim first to discern, and make discernable (and discern in order to make discernable) to the spectators, something that in their lives has been silenced, perhaps lost. Their films however don't stop at this point[3]. I will argue that the work of these artists is not necessarily aimed at revealing themselves as

[3] In the case Akerman, as we will see later in the introduction, her film —seemingly completely fictional—does not even begin at this point.

individuals but at revealing what in their own lives have made them artists, and *these* artists. For this purpose, in their works, Bredier, Denis and Akerman are aiming to reveal what has been hidden, while keeping, *at the same time*, its hidden character. I will show that this double character of the ghost (invisible and visible) is mirrored in the artistic process: the ghost is figure and action. It has both an esthetic and ethical role. Furthermore, it is since it is an artistic figure that the ghost can be action. Indeed, because of the "contagious quality to cinema[4]," and the fact that the "film as a skin acknowledges the effect of a work's circulation among audiences, all of which mark it with their presence[5]," the invisibility of the ghosts become visible to the public and its action "acting" it. The filmmakers use the intrinsic qualities of the cinema, its ghostliness, to show, bear witness and transmit what is haunting them. The ghosts are therefore what allows the private quest to become a collective one.

Additionally, in each movie, the ghosts uncover an undercurrent aspect of the film that belongs to another genre. For example, in Bredier's autobiographical documentary, the ghosts trace a fictional line; in Denis's fiction, the ghosts are alluding to an autobiographical reality, and in Akerman's movie, the ghost is pointing to interviews with Akerman's mother that never appear in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce 1080 Bruxelles*. I will show that this insertion of ghosts in the movies questions the individual (the woman) about what had made her become an artist, and the artist about the mystery that woman carried in her. I will show that

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[4] Laura U. Marks. *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Duke UP, 2000) xii.

[5] Id., xi.

this confusion of genres is also a ghostly part of the film: the individual search is intimately mixed with the collective one. As Mulvey says: "The frustrated search for identity has compelled a turn to history, in order to produce and record individual and communal histories " (2006, 4).

The ghosts in the movies I research are not easily identified as ghosts to the viewer. They are not necessarily the expected "spirit of a dead person, especially one believed to appear in bodily likeness to living persons or to haunt their formal habitat[6]." In short, no creatures covered with white floating sheets roam the movies but unique creations that I will identify in each chapter

Sophie Bredier (1968-), discussed in the first chapter, is a French filmmaker, born in Korea and adopted by a French couple when she was four years old. She has made three documentaries that form a triptych produced and shown on the French European TV network, Arte: *Nos traces silencieuses* (Our Silent Traces, 1996), S*éparées (*Separated*,* 2001) and *Corps étranger* (Foreign Body, 2004). In the first movie, Originally, Bredier tries to understand why she has been adopted. Her project consists of researching her past through her memory and her parents' memory, but also interviewing strangers, who, like her, have traces on their bodies, traces that, if interpreted correctly, might tell the past. In the second movie, shot in video, she goes to Korea to try to find her birth parents, or some traces of her life in her birth country, but without success. She then inserts 8 mm images of little girls playing in the streets. I will argue that these little girls are treated as if they could have been her, shot as she played in the streets when she was three or four years

[6] Webster dictionary.

old. These images are the ghosts of other images. They make visible images that are invisible, images of her life in Korea, images of her adoption, in any case images that are missing, like a home movie that was never shot[7].

If the ghosts in Bredier's films first take the form of traces on the skin, then images of an absent film, those in Claire Denis's (1946-) can be found in repetition (of images, of objects, and characters). She admits that these repetitions are the ghosts of her previous films. In the second chapter, my reading of *Chocolat* (1988) and *Beau Travail* (1999) will show that these ghosts are not only the memories of the film before, as the filmmaker claims, but Denis's way of investigating the world in which she lives. From movie to movie, she instates an investigation, a questioning about her place and her role in the world, born as I will show, from the geographical and historical situation she grew up in.

It is in the form of ellipsis that Chantal Akerman's ghosts appear. In *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce 1080 Bruxelles* shot in 1975 when she was 25 years old, Jeanne Dielman is widowed housewife who prostitutes herself in the afternoon, when her son is at school. The movie lasting 200 minutes describes in details the everyday chores of Jeanne Dielman, but elides the two first sex scenes. In the third chapter, I will argue that these ellipses are pointing to the absence of the story of Akerman's mother, silenced by the terror of the extermination camps.

As we see, even though brought forth by different technical operations, the ghosts in Bredier, Denis and Akerman's movies are linked with both personal and

[7] The third movie was never shown in the movie theaters. It is not for sale and therefore I never saw it and won't discuss it in this work. In that movie, Sophie Bredier is pregnant and wonders how to have a child when she does not know anything about her origins.

collective history: for Bredier, it is both her adoption and the separation of the two Koreas; for Denis is the colonization and decolonization of Africa, a continent where she lived until the age of thirteen; and for Akerman, the time her mother passed in a concentration camp that has been hidden from her. Each of these works includes different genres— autobiography, fiction and documentary— and the lines between them are difficult to untangle because what is common to all three aspects of the films are the ghosts.

Indeed, ghosts are not only personal shadows but form structures that make the invisible visible. In the wake of modern and contemporary history, various forms of death, displacement, or trauma interrupt the recovery of stories, and history. Worse, they prevent the transmission, install the silence, and contradict the chronological transmission—from parent to child. Confronted to this situation, these filmmakers question their role as artists, subsequently the ghosts they create play a different part than the mere recollection of a lost memory. When writing about the responsibility of the artist, Sartre calls for an engagement: "La fonction de l'écrivain est de faire en sorte que nul ne puisse ignorer le monde et que nul ne puisse s'en dire innocent[8]." The function of the artist is to represent the world, to make it visible and to question it: to give art the power to say and to show the real. In doing so, the cinema of Sophie Bredier, Claire Denis and Chantal Akerman follows

[8] Jean-Paul Sartre. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Gallimard-Folio, 1947) 30. "The function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what's it's all about." *What is literature?* Translated by Bernard Frechtman (Methuen and Co, 1967) 14. Sartre speaks about writers, French writers even, but this injunction is applicable to all artists.

a tradition that goes back to the Frères Lumière: show a reality that nobody can suspect without the cinema.

# Chapter 1

## The Other Me
## Sophie Bredier's *Nos traces* silencieuses and *Séparées*

*Nos traces silencieuses* (Our Silent Traces, 1996) and *Séparées* (Separated, 2001)[9] are complementary and are built on the same narrative and filmic structure. They tell Sophie Bredier's research of the first four years of her life, before her adoption by a French couple. She has few memories of these four years and what she knows is the story her adoptive parents told her: she was an orphan and they adopted her from a Korean orphanage. Yet she distrusts this story of her origins: indeed, she has both the sentiment that this is not a complete story of her adoption and that she might in fact not be an orphan. This unease provokes the need to retrieve the narrative her past (and eventually her birth family). This is the starting point of her search.

*Nos traces silencieuses* is structured solely around interviews. There are two types of interviews. The first is autobiographical: Bredier questions her adoptive parents and Korean friends about her life and the life in Korea at the time of her birth. The second consists of interviews of people who are strangers to Bredier but have all, like her, traces on their skin (therefore silent). In this second series of

[9] *Nos traces silencieuses.* Prix du Jury documentaire au festival de Belfort 1998 ; Sélection au Forum du jeune cinéma de Berlin 1999 ; Prix Image de la Culture (CNC) et prix des Cinémas de recherche au festival de Marseille "Vues sur les docs"1999 ; Golden Spire Award au Golden Gate Awards, San Francisco 2000. National diffusion , March 29, 2000. *Séparées*. Prix Louis Marcorelles au Cinéma du réel 2001. Festival de films de Femmes de Créteil 2001. The two first films were co-written Myriam Aziza but because it is Bredier's story, it is often considered as Bredier's movies.

interviews, Sophie is asking her interviewees to tell the story that is behind the trace. It is in the juxtaposition of these two series of interviews that seem to have nothing in common that Bredier tries to unravel the mystery of her origins.

In *Séparées*, Bredier travels to Korea to continue her research. This movie too is built on two types of interviews: like in the first movie, some are autobiographical—research in archives and other sources that could guide her to find those four years and perhaps her biological family members. The second type consists of interviews of Korean people who have been separated from members of their families. Like in the first movie where Sophie Bredier is speaking to strangers in order to understand how to tell a story that has left marks on the skin (and sometimes only that), in this part, she asks people what they feel about being separated forever from loved ones. Again, she tries to create a common history with strangers (here Koreans) in order to understand her own, and for the purpose to recuperating her Korean part.

The question that haunts Bredier is how to find not only Korea as an exotic country but also the part of her that is foreign to herself. She tries, through the movie, to recover the Other in her she thinks she feels or recognizes, the other part of herself that has been separated, I argue, as in an amputation. The pain she feels proves that something is missing (the same pain as the pain caused by a phantom limb) and it seems that Sophie comes to the conclusion that the only part of herself, the only real part of herself, is this Korean part that has been amputated.

In *Séparées* though, there is a new element, which does not appear in *Nos traces silencieuses*: inserts in 8mm film. They are silent images of little girls playing,

of a father going back home—images of daily family life—and images of Sophie walking in Seoul. These shots — fleeting images, seemingly not linked and not in relation to either the interviews or the autobiographical inquiry, overexposed therefore whiter than the video image in the rest of the film— are clearly intended to make the viewers believe that they see ghosts.

I will argue that the inserts of films are the ghosts of a story that is missing, and absent forever. Like the silent traces in the first documentary, the ghost images represent an absence but through excess. The traces and the ghost images are an addition to the narrative of a void. Additionally, the ghost images form a fiction inserted in the narrative of the documentary that asks questions about identity and filiation.

Amputation

*Nos traces silencieuses* begins with a shot of Sophie Bredier and her father sitting on a couch. She shows him marks on her thigh and asks him how she got them. He cannot remember. The next scene is shot in a dermatologist's office. The doctor tells her that these marks on her skin are scars, most probably burn marks. Sophie says that she has a vague memory of having a bandage on her leg. She adds that she is afraid to lose her scars and the doctor reassures her: they will never disappear. He says: "Scars are the skin's memories[10]." Then Sophie wonders: "What memory? What story?" Sophie Bredier adopts the same position as Annette Kuhn:

[10] The translation of the movie lines is mine.

> The past is like the scene of the crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain. From these traces, markers that point towards a past presence, to something that has happened in this place, a (re)construction, if not a simulacrum of the event can be pieced together. Memory work has a great deal in common with forms of inquiry which — like detective work and archeology, say — involve working backwards — searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstruction out of fragments of evidence[11].

The movie is edited as a series of intertwined dialogues: sequence with her adoptive parents, conversations with Korean friends and interviews with strangers who have traces on their bodies: the first one with a survivor of the Nazi extermination camps, the second with a Cambodian man survivor of Pol Pot, and the third with a woman who has abandoned her daughter. The deportee has removed the concentration camp tattooed on his arm and keeps it to give it to his children as an inheritance. He claims that this number is for him the proof of the existence of his parents who had been killed the very same day his number was tattooed on his arm. To leave this piece of skin to his children is to leave a testimony. He adds at the end of his interview that if this piece of skin disappeared he would feel that something is missing. The Cambodian man says that even without the scars on his body, he would remember that he has lost his brother and his sister during the Pol-Pot era but the scars make memories more immediate. He adds, "scars are the memories of something missing." The third witness, a woman, tells Sophie that the tattoo of the

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[11] Annette Kuhn. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination (*Verso, 1995) 4.

salamander covering all of her back reminds her that her husband died in a motorcycle accident and that she could not recover from this grief and had to abandon their child[12].

During the sequence with the parents, Sophie is shot sitting on a couch between her mother and her father, and asking them questions about her adoption. She tells them that she is certain that she is not an orphan. She is convinced that it is her biological father who gave her to adoption. For a long time, her parents deny this version. They tell their daughter that her life began at age four, when she arrived in France with them and they changed her Korean first name to Sophie. When finally, in the adoption documents file, Sophie finds the proof of what she guessed was true, that her adoptive parents had the biological father sign her paper in order to finalize the adoption, her adoptive mother cannot stand these questions anymore and leave the room (and the film) and the father admits that they knew about her birth father who was therefore alive when Sophie was adopted.

With her Korean friends, Sophie verifies and tries to explain the shreds of memories that she still has—or thinks she has. For example, her friends venture that the scars might come from a coal-burning heater found in Korea at the time of Sophie's birth. Obviously her skin has memories that Sophie doesn't share. They also feed her typical Korean food teach her how to cook it, or to recover a taste that she might have lost. Through the process of speaking with her friends and trying out

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[12] François Noudelmann writes: "Le passage des marques, taches et points transforme le corps en une surface qui recueille la mémoire des êtres passés." ("The passage of marks and spots transform the body in a surface that gathers the memory of passed beings"). Pour en finir avec la généalogie (Editions Léo Scheer 2004) 66. My translation.

with them a few options— for instance, since the family had a TV, they were not poor and didn't give her away because of hardship— Sophie sketches a possible story of her abandonment and her adoption[13].

At the end of Nos *traces silencieuses*, Sophie's parents speak fondly of the day she arrived with them in France: they remember the new clothes they brought with them to Korea, and particularly a little red coat that she wore upon her arrival in her new country. Upon checking this story with pictures, the Brediers realize that Sophie didn't wear a red coat and that it was just a product of their imagination. The last image of the first documentary shows Sophie Bredier on a moving walk in a French airport where she stands facing back, and the impression is that she is going backwards not only physically but temporally[14].

*Separées* begins where *Nos trace silencieuses* ends: Bredier is on a moving walk but facing forward. Then her voice explains over images of clouds that she is on her way to find her sister beginning with: "Once upon a time…" and continues with the story that Sophie was separated from a little girl—her sister—when they were so close to each other[15]. "Korea is not my country but we have something in common: separation." When she arrives in Korea, the taxi driver speaks to her in Korean and she makes a show of not understanding[16].

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[13] Her father was married and had a daughter but had also a mistress — Sophie's mother. When the latter died, the legitimate wife didn't want Sophie who was then given to adoption.

[14] Of course this research could be seen as therapy. But it is the after therapy reconstitution.

[15] We can also see the going backward and forward on the moving walk, as the duality of her identity, or as the completeness she would feel if she was reunited with her half-sister.

[16] She answers to him in French and shows surprise that he addresses her in Korean, What is surprising and certainly not innocent is that she never mentions the main trace, which has not been erased and will never be, her face's traits. Her face that makes people think she is a stranger in France is what makes the Koreans think she is one of them. In Korea though, she needs a translator.

The structure of *Séparées* is, like *Nos traces silencieuses*, constructed around interviews. The first series of interviews is of Korean people who have either abandoned their children or were separated from family members because of the partition of Korea[17]. In this series, a few times—when a father who abandoned his daughter was found by her, or at the end, when a mother acknowledges that she did abandon her daughter—Sophie cries and the camera stays on her tearful face.

As in the first movie, two series are woven together. The second series of interviews constitutes a more personal and factual research: Bredier interviews people who might give her some information on her own abandonment and how to find her sister—civil servants mainly (French embassy, orphanage director, etc.) but also a TV host who has a program helping people retrieve their lost family members and reuniting them. In this part, she does not have more success than in the first one; very unlucky circumstances prevent her from finding the official documents and therefore the people (parents or sister) that could reveal her story to her. She cannot repair the ruptured thread of her genealogy.

But in *Séparées*, appearing seemingly randomly, are images that are in clear rupture with the rest of the documentary. First Bredier changes film: the documentary is shot in video whereas the images I am referring to are shot in 8mm. They seem overexposed or out of focus as if an amateur, not a professional director, had filmed them. Moreover they are silent and this silence is remarkable; indeed all the shots in Korean streets are very noisy: Korean music getting out of amplifiers,

[17] During the partition, the people who were on the other side of the border were trapped there forever. For example, soldiers who followed their army got separated from their families left behind and could never come back.

children screaming… In these shots interrupting other sequences and mainly streets scenes, the noise disappears. The silence becomes the only noise and is very perceptible. Rarely, we hear the muffled motor of the camera or some few Korean music notes over the images.

These shots are of two types: scenes of Korean daily life (father coming back home, little girls playing in the street, etc.) and some images of Sophie walking in the streets of Seoul or the park of the orphanage. The first one appears after Sophie meets the first interviewee. He has been separated from his father during the partition, and this separation has lasted fifty years. The interview lasts six minutes. After the last sentence of the man, there is a cut and we see Sophie in an open market. We see her "speak" with a seller, and then there is a close-up to some bonbons. The next image is the same image of the candies but the film is changed to 8mm, the noises disappear and we see a close-up of Sophie eating a sweet and then eating some sort of hot root. The smoke getting out of the open-air pot envelops her. Later, Bredier interviews an employee of the French embassy in Seoul and he tells her that since she has been adopted illegally (not through the official organization) she cannot be found in the embassy adoption files. Cut to the face of Bredier and cut to a 8mm film sequence of 12 seconds showing four or five years old children playing together. We can hear children laughter over the images (we don't see them laughing). The next image is in video and shows a taxi driver shot from inside the taxi asking directions for the orphanage. In the middle of the film, there is the interview of a mother who has given to adoption her two younger children and has kept her older daughter. The daughter, an adult now, speaks about the pain and the

longing she feels for her sibling she felt all of her life. There is a cut and the next shot is in 8mm and lasts eight seconds. It shows a little girl dressed in traditional dress standing on a shore (we see the sea near her) and praying. There is absolutely no sound here. Then there is cut, and quick shots of streets of Seoul at night while very loud diegetic sounds are heard (music, people laughing and screaming).

As we can see with these few examples, the 8mm images are of different length; it is impossible to predict when they are going to appear; they seem to materialize fortuitously and furtively. Moreover, while the rest of the sequences all have a purpose, a reason to be, these sequences don't have any relation with the rest of the characters in the movie (the people that are interviewed) and don't bring any explanation to what is said or looked for.

These fleeting images appearing in the texture of the main movie are bona fide ghosts. The treatment used by the director does not allow any hesitation or interpretation. The first time they appear, the viewer might not catch them, or he might wonder at what s/he had seen. These images are built-in ghosts. They are an appeal to the viewer: you are watching a haunted documentary.

Unlike the ellipsis-as-ghost that we find in *Jeanne Dielman, 13 quai du commerce 1080 Bruxelles*, the images in 8mm are in excess. If they show that something is missing, it is not their main function. Their purpose is to show that something is added: a fiction in the documentary[18], or a fictional thread. However, these takes of a few seconds to one minute don't add up to form a story. Actually, their repetition—not regular, not expected— hollow up a gap in the narrative line of

[18] We can remember that Bredier's trip to Korea begins with "Once upon a time," the canonical words of the fairy tale.

the documentary. In fact they signal that a narrative is impossible. These images constitute clearly something added but do not explain what is missing. They are part of a story that could have happened, and as the past conditional in language is the sign of fiction in language, these images show what *did not* happen: either the facts showed in the images, or in any case the memory of the facts. They show that Sophie Bredier does not appear in the children playing and no father, mother or sister can tell her this story that appears here in segments.

Yet, the 8mm images of Sophie as an adult have a complementary role: they are a reenacting of what she remembers: eating bonbons, walking in the orphanage… Put together, the shots of little girls and of Sophie attest to the necessity to add a film to have a complete story. In addition, they attest to the fact that in this complete story, the story of her childhood does not appear. This part that has been amputated is missing forever.

We will see in the next two sections of this work that this ghostly story is part of the prosthetic past that Sophie Bredier builds for herself.

Looking for oneself

The research we witness in both movies is born from a silence and an absence. The silence of Bredier's adoptive parents who didn't tell her the conditions of her adoption, and the quasi absence of memories for these four years. The silence and the absence are also a product of an erasure/obliteration performed at both ends of Sophie's life: her French parents erased (perhaps from their memory) traces of Sophie's biological father and in Korea, because of illegal methods of adoption, all

the files have been destroyed in order to protect the individuals who where at the root of these illicit practices. Sophie is therefore considered as a foundling.

Bredier, in her autobiographical search, follows a few parallel and sometimes complementary paths. Or tries[19]. The first line of inquiry is that she looks for herself by erasing what has been recovered from the first four years of her life, to find what is under it. She is looking for the palimpsest of the four years. Her first gesture is therefore to erase the erasure. In the first movie, by interpreting official documents and the traces she has on her skin, she undoes the story her parents told her. Then, in the second movie, her effort is more drastic. To erase this life in France is also to erase the memory loss, the loss of her language, of her traditions, as if the departure from Korea never happened, as if this trip to Korea is not a return, as if she could erase the return and by the same gesture the departure. In the second line of inquiry, she sets about finding the imprints of her own steps, from her father's house to the orphanage and from the orphanage to the embassy and to make them speak. i.e. reconstitute the story of her life in Korea, the reasons for her abandonment, and the conditions of her adoption. This research is tantamount to undo the erasing that had happened twenty-five years earlier, and then during twenty-five years, day after day. As we have seen, the reconstitution of this genealogy fails and the erasure is the only act that remains and can be proven[20].

While trying to attain the complete genealogical mirage, Sophie builds another filiation: even though an orphan, she is a Korean. She is a Korean orphan

[19] I will look at each one in particular, even though they should be analyzed together.

[20] Bredier says: "C'est un effacement total de toute trace" (It's a total erasure of all traces).

like many other Koreans. She belongs to this country's population not only because she was born in Korea but also because her story is a Korean story. Since like some many Koreans she has been separated from her family, she says, "When I hear these stories, I feel Korean." The "we", "our" that she uses so often belong to different families, however through them—by building this somewhat artificial "we"—she can weave a Korean story in which she would have a part. She obviously shares the feeling of people she interviews. For example, the first man tells that he has been abandoned by his father who lives in the North (the father had to leave with the army and has left his family behind, in the South). This man says:

> Sometimes I felt hate for him. I wanted to take vengeance. Some other times I wanted to make things up with him. I spent my youth torn between reconciliation and hate. What got me out of this void is my father. I had to see him for him to stop being an abstract being for me.

While the man talks, the audience sees the recognition of those same feelings on Sophie's face[21]. She does not speak the language and does not know anything about the culture, but she attempts to be Korean by displaying that she has been separated from her sister[22] and that separateness is common in Korea[23]. Through the Koreans' stories of separation, she thinks she can weave a thread from Korea to her. She says: "It's not my blood that makes me Korean, it's history that draws me

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[21] With a time laps though because she has to wait for the translator to translate.

[22] In every interview she mentions it and it has been kept during editing She asks Jacqueline, her translator and friend, "Did you tell him that me too, I've lost a sister?"

[23] One of the interviewees is a TV host for a KBS program that researches separated Koreans and makes them meet again on screen. Sitting with him and watching a very emotional reunion, Sophie Bredier asks, "Looking for one's family is a personal search, why should I ask help from a TV program?" The host explains to her that this program exists since 1983 and was necessary because separation is such a problem in Korea.

closer to Koreans[24]." Sophie discards blood to choose a filiation by affinities[25] and, as in the first movie with the people who bore traces on their bodies, she imagines a community. A community of people who were abandoned and who abandoned, people, who should form a cohesive group.

What's more, when she says, "I have been separated from my sister like the two Koreas have been separated," she claims that she belongs to Korea because she is a representation of the country and the country represents her. She sees the historical and geographical wrenching of the two Koreas as tantamount to her own. Sophie Bredier tries to be Korean by posing as the effigy of her birth country. She is the image of the collective grief. She poses as the representation of the separation, of the annihilation of the totality.

However, here again, Bredier realizes that her history draws her away instead of making her closer to Korea and Koreans. If the Koreans recognize her blood, her traits as Korean, they don't understand what she is doing back in Korea since she has no more family to be reunited with. She is not part of the community or the country since she has proofs that she will stay an orphan[26]. The mother of her friend Jacqueline tells Sophie that she is Korean but she needs to *go back where she comes from*. Sophie Bredier looks like the people she does not belong to and belongs to people she doesn't look like.

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[24] This sentence is strange because it is by blood that she is Korean and nothing else.

[25] See Francois Noudelmann's beautiful book: *Les airs de famille. Une philosophie des affinités* (Gallimard, 2012).

[26] A painful moment in the movie is when she understands from the testimonies that the abandoned children, the foundlings are not welcomed anymore. They are considered as a stigma in the Korean society.

In these two movies, we witness the attempt of the artistic creation of a community and the artistic attempt of belonging to it by sharing a collective mourning. For Sophie Bredier, belonging to the Korean people would mean that her story is a complete one—even if she has been abandoned. But it is not the case: her story is missing. At this point, the filmmaker completes her story with added images. Images in excess.

Returning and revenants

Images in 8mm punctuate the movie. Their length varies (from a few seconds to one minute) and they appear without regular temporality. Even though all the fourteen inserts are of the same technical model (film, silence or Korean music, rumbling of the camera engine), they belong to two categories: the first one shows images of a nun in an orphanage; shots of Sophie eating flowers in the orphanage yard; walking in a street, thus images related to what we know about Bredier's story. The second category consists of shots of little girls— in traditional costume; playing in the street; a mother with her child on her back; a father going back home. Images of family life. The images of families seem to be taken from amateur films, home movies shot during vacations by the father of the family to keep a memory of a life together They remind us also of archival images, i.e. old documents gathered for historical elucidation or documentation (but they are not archival images). In both cases, these images seem to witness a past.

What is remarkable is that shots of both categories belong to today. None of these images has been shot in the past, even though, because of the treatment of the

film, we might have the illusion that we see two different eras: the first one of which would be Sophie's childhood's and the other that would be the present.

Both categories, because of their quality (fleeting and ingrained in the documentary) remind us of these amateur movies of the 60-70s[27]. They are silent except for the noise of the camera engine and some Korean music over them. This period corresponds to the time when Sophie was a child. Indeed, the Super 8 camera was commercialized by Kodak in 1965 and came into fashion in the 70s because it had its own projector[28]. The shots look like home movies. Home movies, as Michele Citron reminds us, are movies principally shot by the father[29]. They are movies shot in order to keep a souvenir of the children and of the family life, but also to establish a legend, a fiction about the family life. They are movies watched together as a family.

> Watching home movies together…. gave my family a sense of history of themselves as a unit and a way to position themselves in the past….we needed to believe that the visual "evidence" was honest. We took the surface image as a sign for the whole lived experienced. We wanted to believe that the piece was, in fact, the whole (Citron 2).

Quite certainly Sophie can find in her attic in France such home movies, but not in any attic in Korea. This is a home movie that has not been shot.

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[27] Even the shots where Sophie is an adult. I will explain this phenomenon later in the chapter.
[28] It is possible that in Korea, in 1974, people had only a 8mm camera and not a Super 8 camera. It might be the same for the Brediers.
[29] See Michele Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) about the role played by the father in the production of home movies.

These ghostly images play many roles, but all converge toward the possibility of reinscription of Sophie Bredier in history, or at least in a story. First, through these images, she inscribed herself in a home movie. This parallel film seems to be the ancestral film of Korea that could have been shot at any period of time. The use of film gives a timeless dimension to the viewer who in turn has the illusion that Bredier is inscribed in Korea's past and therefore has a past in Korea. As Marks says (following Deleuze, himself following Bergson) speaking of home videos of family gatherings:

> At the moment the video is shot, the two aspects of the time look the same; but the present-that-passes [the actual images] can never be recalled (I feel ill; I am angry at my mother), while the past-that-is-preserved [the virtual image] (we are gathered around the table, smiling) becomes the institutionalized representation of the moment. Virtual images tend to compete with recollection images—the memory I have of the gathering that is not captured on the video—and, as we know, their power is such that they often come to stand in for our memories. (40).

The virtual images in Bredier's movie are intended to stand for her memories. And, because these shots seem to be belonging to home movies, we believe them to be authentic, or we accept the illusion that the filmmaker wants us to have.

> The point is driven home by our belief in the authenticity of these images, or at least a belief that what we see in the photograph must exist, or have existed, in order to be photographed. As Roland Barthes has written, with the

> photograph, ”the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.” (Citron 17)

Moreover, the viewer has the impression that he sees Sophie Bredier’s memory (ies). Indeed the fragmentation of the images duplicates the way images appear in our memory.

> Memory, it turns out, has its own modes of expression: these are characterized by the fragmentary, non-linear quality of moments recalled out of time. Visual flashes, vignettes, a certain anecdotal quality mark memory texts (Kuhn 1995, 5).

Kuhn’s words explain also the shots of Sophie adult shot with the same 8mm film (and as grainy, silent, etc.). In these shots, Bredier does what she thinks she remembers of her arrival at the orphanage—walking in the yard, eating red flowers, and seeing the nun’s back. Here it is Sophie’s ghost that represents her fragmented and incomplete memories. But additionally because Sophie Bredier walks, eats and laughs in these images, we don’t see only the memory of the time of her childhood but also the creation, the mise-en-scene of the present time that would take place in Korea. Thus, there would be a visual continuity between the time of the childhood and the time of adulthood.

They are however images of her without links. A fantasy of herself in Korea as an adult. Not a story, not an Ariane thread or genealogical thread but images likes mirages. There is nothing under the crust of the stories told in the movie. Only this fiction remains.

These images-oases that are without quest, research, and grief, that are much slower and quieter than the rest of the documentary are also the representation of the illusion. They represent what is intangible. The overexposure gives them the same texture as dreams, the way one could describe in images the subconscious[30], something that is not the result of will. These images belong also to the domain of the vision. Sometimes Sophie is shot walking in slow motion, and the collage of all these slow images of a fleeting Sophie creates a world of the beyond. We have here a revenant. Facing a non-existent palimpsest, Sophie creates a possible one.

The kids in these hazy pictures, the family members, Sophie even, are the ghosts that Sophie has fabricated for herself. They are supposed to be the symbols or even the proofs of the existence of a Korean past. With their help, Bredier decides to go back in the footsteps that she has never walked. Whatever the images are—of Korean families or of Sophie's—the images are shot in the present and in her birth country Sophie can see herself only in the present. There are not "real" visions, or mirages, or even hallucinations, or ghosts, but ghosts fabricated in the editing room. It is a fiction created in the editing room. Forming a parallel movie in which Sophie Bredier is inscribed in the company of Korean children and families, as if she were part of this history, a history without rupture this time, these images are in fact the inscription of a fiction inside of the documentary, which by definition is a movie about reality.

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[30] In French, ghost is translated by *fantôme*, from the Greek *phantasma*. J. Laplanche et J.B. Pontalis define phantasy as a « Imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist representing the fulfillment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. By Donald Nicholson-Smith (Norton and Company, 1973).

After a last interview with a Korean mother who admits that she has abandoned her daughter[31], Sophie Bredier decides to return to France. The voice over explains: "I arrived where someone was waiting for me" and Bredier appears at her adult age *wearing a red coat* and, the red coat she was supposed to have worn when the Brediers adopted her at age 4. This last image of Sophie's is shot in 8mm. This red coat is part of the fiction that her parents have created. The two fictions, Sophie's and her adoptive parents', fuse to form one and to become reality. Maybe. Because images shot in 8mm are images of ghosts. The accomplished return is not to Korea (an impossible return) but to France. It perhaps the return of a ghost.

[31] It is the first time that this word is pronounced by one of the interviewees. Both Sophie and the woman cry and from their dialogue, we understand that Sophie identifies this mother as her putative mother.

# Chapter 2

## Fragmented Bodies
## Claire Denis' *Chocolat* and *Beau Travail*

After working as an assistant to Jacques Rivette then to Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmush, in 1988 Claire Denis made her first movie *Chocolat*. In it, there is one narrative rupture: a flashback bracketed by two present time narrative fragments. The pieces are easy to identify and to put back in chronological order. These stylistic elements could have been particular to *Chocolat* since the movie tells the story of a childhood memory, but in fact ellipses, fragments, traces and repetitions are the stamp of Claire Denis's style. Actually these structural, and anti-narrative elements, take on more and more importance in the narratives of her later films. For example, *35 Shots of Rum* (2008) —that at first glance seems to be a collection of fragments— can be seen not simply as an elliptical story but as the story about ellipses. In *Beau Travail* (1999), the fragments unlike in *35 rhums* but like those in *L'intrus* (2004) for example, are such that they don't allow the audience to reconstitute a chronological and complete story.

In *Chocolat*, there are more imprints (metaphors of imprints) than in the movies that follow: shots of hands and feet appear—feet on the beach, chicken blood on the hand, a burnt hand…—as suggesting, paradoxically, that they could help solve the mystery of the ellipses—finding one's way, one's story, etc. However, this element disappears in further movies probably because it is both the weakest stylistic element and the most difficult to use again. Indeed the trace asks

systematically for a narrative interpretation that the filmmaker does not wish to offer. In her conversation at Emory, Claire Denis said: "If all is explained, I don't see the need to make the film[32]."

Denis adamantly refuses to explain, to interpret, to address the enigma produced not only by the narrative but also by the lack of or the denial of narrative. At the same time, and this is what I will argue here, she herself chooses to appear in her movies. It is not a Hitchcockian complex. We don't see the actual Claire Denis but representations of her, traces of her, ghosts that could be her. The ghosts we encounter wandering in Denis's films are apparitions and re-apparitions; it is the "almost exact" repetition or recurrence of an object or a character that reveal the ghost. But the ghost can be recognized in the possession—they inhabit the body of one of the characters: Protée in *Chocolat* and Galoup in *Beau Travail*.

Denis's films are odes to repetition. The most obvious is the people: the director employs the same team since her first movie; the cinematographer Agnès Godard who was on *Paris, Texas*'s team joined her for *Chocolat* and since then, has been the cinematographer for every movie[33]. It is also true for the rest of the team: Jean-Pol Fargeau who co-writes the scripts, Nelly Quettier, the editor, and most of the technicians, etc. but also for the musicians—Tindersticks—, the actors—among others, Alex Descas acts in six movies; Grégoire Colin in five of them. However it is not rare that a filmmaker works with the same team. Less obvious, objects and shots

[32] "Creativity Conversation with Claire Denis," Nov. 14, 2012, Emory University.

[33] Yves Cape replaced her on *White Material* because she was not available.

might be repeated in the same movie or might pass from movie to movie[34]. They may have a different (sometimes only slightly different) role or identity, or the same one in different movies. These repetitions are not obvious and the viewer has to see all of Denis' movies and scrutinize them (as a critic really) to notice them. This suggests that these recurrences are private to the filmmaker. We may wonder if the repetitions are memories that pass through from one film to the other. We will also wonder if they are our memories, or the director's, or only the characters'. When asked about them, she answers:

> Unconsciously, I kept missing the film before. They are something like a ghost from the film before. Something I regret. The memory of the film before. A void.[35]"

Certainly of the order of the reminder, the recall as she claims, these repetitions are, I believe, also and above all of the order of the obsession or, as Denis herself says, of the *ressassement* (turning over). They are not so much "something [she] regret[s] but something that inhabits her and pushes her to go back incessantly to what she has already shown[36]. This "something missing from the film before," I will argue, is the artistic answer to an artistic inquiry that Denis carries out from movie to movie. These recurrences, like roaming ghosts, bear the representation or the claim of a personal quest but also of a collective inquiry.

Artists often meet their ghosts (or the representation of their ghost) when

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[34] For example, the coffee pot that plays an important role in *Nenette et Boni* (1995) and in *Beau Travail* but appears also in *35 rhums* (2008).

[35] "Creativity Conversation."

[36] I think that during this conversation, if Denis had more time to develop what she was saying, she would have differentiated "regret," "void'" and "ghost;" The repetitions are like ghosts and represent regret or void, "something missing from the film before".

they return—it can be a physical return or a return in memory, it is always an artistic return—when they wish to see themselves as they were before, in a near or far past. However, Claire Denis does not belong in this category: unlike Sophie Bredier's for example, her ghosts are not so much her way to contemplate herself at different stages of life as a way to understand herself, to find herself, but her way to investigate the world in which she lives.

From movie to movie, she installs an inquiry, an investigation, a questioning about her place and her role in the world that is born probably from the geographical and historical situation she grew up in. Signs that the director goes back incessantly to her visions, these ghosts are in return the signs of Denis's investigation not only as an individual (autobiographical quest), but also as an artist at the service of the world. Denis's ghosts are a way for her to observe herself as an artist and to ponder her role and her place as such.

Since forms of repetitions can be found in most of Denis's movies, and since the beauty of these repetitions is that they appear furtively from movie to movie, it would be interesting to follow them all and to set out the net they form. In the frame of this work, I will observe the particular ghosts haunting *Chocolat* and *Beau Travail* because are representative of Denis' ghosts, and explain why ghosts are haunting her films.

Protée, from boy to ghost

Claire Denis lived until she was sixteen years old in different countries of Africa where her father worked for the French colonial government: Cameroon,

Burkina Fasso (then Haute Volta) and Djibouti. *Chocolat* is set in Cameroon and *Beau Travail* in Djibouti. Both movies tell the story of a return (real and in memory), and both movies witness the return of the filmmaker to her childhood countries.

*Chocolat* is the story of France (Mireille Perrier), a young woman, who returns to Cameroon, the country where she grew up. At that time Cameroon is a colony of France and France's father, a colonial administrator. "The film is set in late colonial times, the 1950s, so the notion of decay and lack of control prevails as does the notion of patriarchy[37]". Her parents—Aimée and Marc Dalens—have domestics and Protée (Isaac de Bankolé) is the houseboy[38]. The main part of the movie—France's childhood memory—is bracketed by the present time when the adult France travels in Cameroon as a tourist and wonders if she should go back to her childhood house. On her way to Douala, she is given a ride by Mungo Park, an American residing in Cameroon.

In the sequence set in the past, the child France (Cécile Ducasse) spends most of her time with Protée, who is her guardian, her friend but also, very clearly, her servant; the adult can be ordered around by the eight year old child. Toward the end of the flashback, Protée is fired from his work in the house because of his ambiguous relations with Aimée and is sent to work in the garage. In the next to last sequence, France goes to the garage. Almost as a dare, she asks Protée if the furnace's pipe is hot. Without a word, Protée puts his hand on it. France follows suits and burns her

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[37] Susan Heyward. "Reading Masculinities in Claire Denis's *Chocolat,*"( *Intellect*, 2002), 120.

[38] As I have said above, in this first movie, Claire Denis uses symbolism that disappears in subsequent movies: the names have significations; the young woman who comes back from France to an ex-colony of this country is named France; her mother is Aimée (Beloved) and Protée (Proteus) bears the name of a Greek god who had the gift of prophecy and of metamorphosis (protean).

hand badly. It is the last time the adult and the child see each other. The last image of this sequence is Protée wincing while looking at his burnt hand, then disappearing in the obscurity of the room. This scene can be seen as a pact of separation as well as the end of childhood and of colonization. However the consequence of this burn is that their hands' lines cannot be read, their future cannot be told anymore. When Mongo Park takes France's hands in his to read her palms, he acknowledges that he cannot tell her anything about the decision she has to make.

A lot has been written on France's burnt hand, much less, if at all, on Protée's. The last scene of the movie shows France as an adult at the airport. Through the airport window, she looks at three baggage handlers. One of them seems to be Protée. The solemn Protée has now become a very expansive man, laughing, gesticulating and peeing in a field together with the two others handlers. The luggage handlers are the aim of the point of view shot: France is looking through the airport window, then we see the handlers and the movie ends with them. The long shot and the window make the character difficult to identify: Is it or is it not Protée? In an interview with Kent Jones in 1992, Denis said:

> When you are a foreigner in a country … one little event makes you understand a lot. Very often as I was leaving, looking through the plane window, I would see guys working on the tarmac. I knew I was leaving and I knew this was, like, his everyday life. And I thought all my romantic dreams of Africa always end with this kind of image, so real. … Sometimes you just

see something and you say, "Ah, this is it. This is not my dream[39]."

Denis's rationale is one that she offers often in her interviews: the most mundane scene is the scene that will create reality; it is a scene that allows us to believe in what we see. For example she argued that the coffee machine that passes from *Nenette et Boni* to *Beau travail* and *35 rhums* anchors the scenes in reality. We could argue that it is a "reality effect" in the movie[40], but I think that the outcome is different. This claim of reality does not mean that the repetition—here Protée's reapparition—itself is realistic. In fact, the repetitions accentuate for the spectator strangeness, unfamiliarity, and unreality[41].

Furthermore, *Chocolat* is playing so much on a symbolic level that it is difficult to accept that this very long scene, separated from the narrative of the movie brings reality. On the contrary, I see this scene as a factor of unreality, precisely because one of the bag handlers appears to be Protée. Unlike France who is now in her thirties, Protée has not grown older. The body that appears at the end of the movie is eternally in the present. The very long shot through a window panel prevents the audience from hearing and seeing him clearly. Protée appears at the end of the movie with all the characteristics of a ghost. He is a revenant.

To explain the somewhat fantastic apparition of Protée in the last scene, Claire Denis said that it was Isaac de Bankolé's idea. "I accepted his wish, I told him

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[39] Interview with Kent Jones in 1992, quoted by Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (Urbana UP, 2005) 47.

[40] "The very absence of the signifier, to the advantage of the referent alone, become the very signifier of realism," Roland Barthes. *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1989)148.

[41] The coffee machine in itself is very real and ordinary, but its repetition from one film to the other accentuates its strangeness, especially that this coffee pot is remarkable in all the movies it appears in.

just to be part of the group. I didn't do anything to make him recognizable, but I didn't do anything to hide his identity either. We'll see what happens.[42]" And what happened? Why did Denis leave this scene when she edited her movie? What did she see? Understand? Realize? What do we?

Moral obligation

In one of her interviews, Claire Denis says that in *Chocolat* she felt a moral obligation to talk about colonization[43]. This moral obligation takes two forms: first, she shows the colonization as it was in the 50s, and she questions her place in that system.

Without explaining how, Claire Denis said that her three first movies (*Chocolat*, *S'en fout la mort* (1990) and *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994)) should be seen as a trilogy inspired by the writings of Frantz Fanon, in particular *Peau noire masques blancs*[44]. Many critics tried to explain the links between Fanon's essay and Denis's movies. Martine Beugnet believes that Claire Denis was influenced by Fanon precisely because of France's denial of the colonization. The critic explains the role arts played in this denial:

> Cinema's ability to construct an apparently "authentic" vision of reality, and its essentially visual quality, turned into a privileged vector for a discourse of difference…. Yet… the coming to terms with decolonization, the process of "mourning" and of potential reconciliation…. was obstructed by denial and

[42] Claire Denis in 1998, quoted in Judith Mayne 47.

[43] Heyward, 121.

[44] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire masques blancs,* Seuil, 1952.

> censorship. Unsurprisingly, taken the impact of film on mass audiences and its past link with the colonizing project, this collective forgetting or blindness… particularly affected cinema[45].

The "peau noire" is the black skin of the colonized people and the "masques blancs" are the masques these blacks are wearing so as to be like the whites. In a few striking chapters, Fanon shows which forms these masks take and the situation of black men and women in the colonized countries where they live[46]. Their main predicament says Fanon is that the color of the skin is visible.

> Le Juif n'est pas aimé à partir du moment où il est dépisté. Mais avec moi tout prend un visage *nouveau.* …. Je suis surdéterminé de l'extérieur. Je ne suis pas l'esclave de "l'idée" que les autres ont de moi, mais de mon apparaître.
>
> J'arrive lentement dans le monde, habitué à ne plus prétendre au surgissement. Je m'achemine par réputation. Déjà les regards blancs, les seuls vrais, me dissèquent (93)[47].

We should not look for a precise illustration of Fanon's book in Denis's films but Fanon's influence gives them a political dimension. In *Chocolat*, she shows the alienating gaze of the whites on the black man. Protée is looked at in a sexual way, in an objectified way by the white colonizers[48]. Denis is approaching the

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[45] Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester UP, 2004) 10.

[46] Fanon was from Martinique, then colonized by France and from 1945 French department.

[47] "The Jew is disliked from the moment he is tracked down. But in my case everything takes a *new* guise. … I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance. I move slowly in the world, accustomed now to seek no longer for upheaval. I progress by crawling. And already I am being dissected under white eyes. (Italics Fanon) *Black Skin White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Marmann (Grove Press, 1967) 115-116.

[48] A woman says to Aimée: "Il est beau ton boy," (he is beautiful your boy) or when Protée takes his shower outside, he can be seen by Aimée and France who pass by.

representation of colonization by showing the black man confronted with an image of himself that negates him. While showing the alienating gaze, Denis wonders how to expunge it. At least she wonders if it is possible. After the last scene, when Protée and France burn their hands, the gaze changes. Indeed the next time we see Protée, it is at the airport. Here, the white woman's gaze is not alienating. It is in fact impotent, because it is behind a window and, even more, when the scene continues, we don't know if this is the continuation of the point of view shot, or if the luggage handlers are free from it.

The freedom from the white man's gaze is strengthened by the symbolism of Protée's burnt hand. Like France's hand, Protée's cannot reveal the past. This symbolism of the erased hand lines/erased past represents Protée-the baggage handler as a man that has not known colonization. Fanon says: "Le Noir, même sincère, est esclave du passé (182)[49]"and Protée, in his new persona cannot look back at his past. Hence his relation to the world is, as Fanon dreams of, as a man, not as a black man. De Bankolé and Denis show a bittersweet freedom from the white gaze. This process takes Denis to a second form of engagement: to question her position as an artist. This second form of engagement is expressed through Protée's ghost as well. We have shown that the ghost allows the possibility of a black man liberated from his past. The ghost of the black man represents also the questioning of Claire Denis on her place in Africa when she was a young girl during colonization, and as an adult after it.

[49] "The Negro, however sincere, is a slave of the past," 225.

The last scene of the movie is seen through the white woman's eyes—France (woman but also country)'s eyes. It is her vision[50]. The same way the flashback seemed to be born from France's eyes looking through the window of the car, the bag handlers seem to be created by her gaze. She sees one of the men as Protée. He is a vision born from regret or memory, perhaps a hallucination showing that France is haunted by Protée but also by Africa. The ghost underlines the temporal rupture that the far from seamless flashback hints at; it underlines also that France is not in the right place. Like the ghost she is out of time and out of place. It is also true for Claire Denis. She expressed in many interviews that time and space, history and geography are haunting her.

Denis creates ghosts in her movies in order to ask questions about herself and about the people among whom she lived. Indeed, the apparition of the ghost attests to the use of fiction. However in *Chocolat*, the fiction is closely intertwined with the autobiography. I believe that this ethereal interlacing of fiction and autobiography is Denis's way to articulate an individual conscience in relation to a history that, in 1988, was still deliberately ignored. This individual conscience confronts the collective conscience. As Beugnet writes:

> All her films in some ways explore how History (*Histoire*) permeates stories (*histoires*), the way the individual is affected by the historical and social. And how the individual body is marked and controlled by the body of society. Indeed, not only do the films generate their troubling impact by portraying a past that inhabits the present, with the its scars unhealed and its conflicts

[50] Claire Denis speaks of dream, see above.

> unresolved, but the themes of exile and alienation, and the question of the definition of contemporary identities, serve as a starting point to a renewed investigation of cinematic language (20).

In order to question this colonial past and the recent decolonization (artifacts leaving the country handled by the African bag handlers), Claire Denis haunts the movie through the creation of the ghost —an artistic fiction.

A bit like an intruder, Claire Denis inhabits the bodies on the screen. Claude Lévi-Strauss says: "Nous sommes tous des cannibales. Après tout, le moyen le plus simple d'indentifier autrui à soi-même, c'est encore de le manger[51]." In the case of Denis, the first identification is with the black man. This gesture is not one of compassion or a colonizing one, but one of questioning (or tr,ying to understand). Indeed, we can see that identification also with the one who wanders, who does not find his or her place. The common destiny of the child and the black man is to wander and question. By playing on Fanon's title, we could argue that Denis endorses a "peau blanche, masque noire" (white skin, black mask), not a blackface, but a black mask that identifies with "the black skin, white masks" and takes into account or bears the responsibility of the white skin regarding history. The same way we can see Protée as the ghost of Denis herself as the child she was in Cameroon, as the ghost of her childhood in Africa, we should regard Protée's ghost as Claire Denis as a black man.

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[51] "We are all cannibals. After all, the simplest way to identify the other to oneself is to eat him." Quoted by Jeanette Zwingenberger, curator of the exhibit *Tous cannibales*, La Maison Rouge, Paris, February 12 to May 15, 2011. Catalogue of the exhibit published by ArtPress (20, février-mars-avril, 2011), 9. My translation. Intruders, cannibals, etc. can be found in many of Denis's movies. In *Trouble everyday*, the character played by Béatrice Dalle is a cannibal. In *L'intrus* (The Intruder), the character played by Michel Subor is supposed to receive a heart transplant.

As Beugnet writes above, the questioning does not find an answer, the puzzling does not find a release and it is this anguish that Claire Denis transmits. *Chocolat* is a haunted movie whose ghosts, in one shape or other, will be wandering in her other films. To borrow the famous last line from Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*: "O mon corps, fais de moi un homme qui interroge![52]"

*Chocolat*, Claire Denis's first movie, exposes, sometimes naively, the difficulty of leaving and returning which in subsequent movies translates into an investigation of the concept of place. Through the ghost, this wandering figure, the director muses about having or not having a place, and of being in or not in the right place. Through it, she discovers and reveals her responsibility as an artist.

From Protée to Galoup

As in *Chocolat*, in *Beau Travail*, the ghost appears during a return of Claire Denis to one of her childhood countries, Djibouti, and the return in memory of one of the characters, Galoup. In *Beau Travail* though, we see a more sophisticated ghost who randomly changes places. Moreover, he is the narrator of the movie (as a voice over). Or perhaps it is the narrator who becomes a ghost. In this very physical movie, the bodies are at the same time ethereal and extraordinary present. I will argue that it is through the duality of the body, of a man's body, and of the narrator that Claire Denis questions her work as a filmmaker.

[52] "O my body, make of me a man who questions," 232.

The movie begins with the titles cut by a series of short shots edited elliptically —dancers in a discotheque, a fresco representing soldiers…[53]. After the last title—the name of the movie—there is another series of scenes—desert, people in a train, an abandoned tank, a long tracking shot on the bodies of soldiers standing in the desert, and over this last scene, the extradiegetic music is "Billy Budd" by Benjamin Britten[54]. With the same music over, we see a shot of light on the sea, surimposed with a close up of fingers holding a pen. After another series of close ups of soldiers on a boat, a voice replaces the opera music and the décor of Djibouti is replaced by a balcony of a Marseille building. Galoup, sitting on this balcony, is writing on a notebook. His voice says over the image: "Marseille, fin février, j'ai du temps devant moi maintenant…[55]" From this scene, we understand that the first seven minutes of the movie might have been Galoup's memories of his life in the Legion in Djibouti.

Galoup (Denis Lavant) is writing his journal in Marseille. He was a soldier in the Foreign Legion and has been discharged from the Army because he tried to kill one of his soldiers, Gilles Santain. In his journal, he tells the story of what happened to him: he became jealous of Santain (Grégoire Colin) and abandoned him in the desert with a sabotaged compass for a sure death. Galoup's voice over introduces the images of his life in Djibouti as one of the officers of the Legion appears on the screen. We see the training of the soldiers, their time off at a club and in the streets

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[53] They are extracts of scenes of the movie, like a medley.

[54] *Beau Travail* is inspired by *Billy Budd, Sailor* by Herman Melville (1924). The opera by Benjamin Britten was written and performed the first time in 1951.

[55] "Marseille, end of February, I have some free time now….". My translation.

of the city. We see their usual routine as well as their relationship with their officers (Galoup and the commandant played by Michel Subor)[56].

The penultimate scene shows Galoup on his bed, a gun in his hand. A vein is pulsing on his biceps. Unlike what the spectator would anticipate, the last scene does not show Galoup's dead body or his burial. To our surprise, Galoup appears to be very alive, dancing a frenzied dance to the disco song by Corona: "The Rhythm of the Night". During the dance, Galoup is wearing a black shirt and black pants, an outfit that is drastically different from the famous white uniform of the Legion. It is not an outfit that is unknown to the audience though. During the movie Galoup is seen wearing in scenes set in Marseille but also, surprisingly, in scenes set in Djibouti. One of these scenes shows the legionnaires who, after a night of dancing and drinking, carry two of their comrades on their shoulders—first a black legionnaire, then Gilles Santain. Galoup's voice over says: "They held above them one of their own". It looks like a religious or a royal procession in the streets of Djibouti. Galoup crosses their path but they don't seem to see him and he swings holding a lamppost like a character in a musical. In *Senses of Cinema*, Tamara Tracz comments:

> When he watches Galoup is dressed, as he is periodically throughout the film, in black. These clothes play no part in the story Galoup narrates; his fall from

[56] The actor Michel Subor appears in the same role and under the same name of Bruno Forrestier in *Le petit soldat* by Jean-Luc Godard. *Beau Travail* picks up where *Le petit soldat* stopped: after siding with the extreme right during the Algerian War, he disappears and reappears in *Beau Travail* with a mysterious history of somebody having worked against the Algerians. Subor/Forrestier could also be considered as a ghost and will probably be in a larger work. For the discussion on this link between Godard and Denis, see Mayne, 95.

grace from the Legion. Neither does it seem part of his life in Marseille[57].

Unlike Tracz, I think these clothes play a narrative role in the movie. When he wears black, Galoup is a ghost. Like Protée in *Chocolat* who could not be at the airport twenty years after the colonization, Galoup cannot be in Djibouti in his Marseille black outfit. And he could not dance in Marseille since the discotheque is in Djibouti. Like in *Chocolat*, where the apparition of Protée was mysterious, in *Beau Travail,* the apparition of Galoup dancing is enigmatic. Finally, like Protée, who, as a ghost, is behaving differently than he did when he was "real" (exuberant instead of silent and solemn), in his dance Galoup performs a choreography that is at the opposite of the controlled movements of the legionnaire soldier.

Tracz argues that:

> The final images of Galoup in Marseille —the gun in his hand, the pulse in his arm — suggest a suicide. But it would be wrong in a film such as *Beau travail* to take anything so literally, and to then extrapolate that the figure in black is Galoup's ghost. Nevertheless, implications of ghostliness are certainly present.

Unlike her, I extrapolate that the figure in black is Galoup's ghost. Even though he does not wear the ghostly white sheet (actually quite the contrary), he appears in clothes that don't belong to the time he is in. Moreover, people cannot see him. Finally, each time Galoup is dressed in black he reveals that he is part of a scene from which he is also absent.

When Tracz considers Galoup somewhat as a ghost, she explains that:

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[57] Tamara Tracz, "Beau Travail, "*Senses of Cinema*, Issue 42, February 13, 2007 (no pagination).

> As a ghost Galoup reaches the conclusion of his life as an outsider. Despite the tenacity with which he clings to the Legion, he is never really a part of it. He belongs to no group, he does not socialize with the soldiers he trains or with Forestier, the man he worships. Galoup understands his isolation.

Obviously, Tracz considers the ghost only diegetically. The ghost belongs to the story in which it appears—the legionnaire who has been dismissed from the Legion—and it seems that the only solution for understanding the presence of this ghost is to weave him into the story[58].

I will contend that the ghost cannot be examined only at the diegetic level. Galoup's ghost is in fact one of the non-narrative elements we mentioned above. The ghost in this movie is the narrator, and because the narrator is a ghost, he does not completely belong to the story he is telling either.

Indeed, the end credits slice his dance in two segments. Until the credits appear, Galoup is still in the narrative, but when he reappears after the first part of the credits, he gets out of the narrative to become part of the film. For this reason, I think that instead of seeing Galoup only as a ghost that would appear because the ex-soldier committed suicide, we should consider the person in black as belonging to a parallel narrative. Denis Lavant is not only Galoup the officer in activity or the retired one remembering his life, but also the narrator haunting the scenes of the movie, observing what he is narrating without being a carnal presence.

[58] Tracz concludes her paper by saying that *Beau Travail* does not need "to be understood to be understood." It is a shared opinion among the critics to believe that. The movie is too beautiful in its mystery to be cut in pieces and studied.

Twelve years before *Beau Travail*, Claire Denis was Wim Wenders's first assistant on *Wings of Desire*. The ghost of Galoup moving in and out the fiction has many common traits with the angels over Berlin whose role is to be—among other things—the memory of the world and of the movie. Wim Wenders tells that:

> On the wall in front of [Peter Handke's] writing desk was a reproduction of Rembrandt's *Homer:* an old man seated and talking—to whom? Originally, Rembrandt had him speaking to a disciple, but the picture had been cut in two and the storyteller had been separated from his listener, so he's now merely soliloquizing. Peter was very fond of the painting and changed my idea of the archangel to an immortal poet. Now I, for my part, had no idea of how to integrate Homer into my script. Finally, we had Homer living in a library, and Peter's dialogue became a voice inside his head. Curt Bois was neither man nor angel but both at once, because he's as old as the cinema itself[59].

In Claire Denis's movie, the ghost and the storyteller are one person. And since the stories are the entries in Galoup's journal, there is an autobiographical dimension to his stories. As in *Chocolat*, the ghost is the pivotal element between autobiography and fiction; it shows how the border between them is blurried. The ghost shows the painful passage between the woman and the artist.

In *Chocolat* where we could discern Claire Denis in the ghost of the black man, in *Beau Travail*, Claire Denis wanders in her movie in the body of Galoup, or in Galoup's ghost. Galoup the outsider. She asks through this movie on memory, on

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[59] *In Wings of Desire* by Wim Wenders. *Current*, November 9, 2009.

guilt and responsibility represented as an endless *ressassement* (training, ironing, etc.) where her place is.

There are other ghosts in Claire Denis's movies. For example in *White Material*, a movie about a white woman not being at her place in Africa[60], Manuel/the dog could be understood as one. We usually assume that Claire Denis is commenting on the place of white people in Africa. I think, more generally, that she returns over and over to a crucial inquiry, a maddening question that she repeats in every film, not only what is my place? But if I don't know what my place is, then what is yours? What is our place?

Sophie Bredier inserts ghosts in her films to question her place in the Korean society and to wonder if her individual plea could be an artistic, therefore a collective one. Claire Denis clearly makes her ghosts figures of combat, of revolt, of refusal[61]. Chantal Akerman, who like Claire Denis believes in ghosts, alludes to them but don't show them. They don't belong to the narrative of the movie but to the extradiegetic story of her mother who survived a nazi extermination camp. Here again, the ghosts' role is one of revolt, denunciation refusal on the part of the artist for the absurdity felt by the daughter since her childhood.

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[60] Indeed, there is *Beau Travail* a question of right or wrong place (Galoup is in a wrong place in the Legion even though he thinks he is at his place; Santain in not in his place in the desert; the legionnaires might not be in their place in Djibouti) that goes beyond the film. In *White Material*, Maria (Isabelle Huppert) is also at the wrong place. Even in Denis's very last movie, *Les salauds*, the characters are ill at ease in the places they are in.

[61] We find this also in Bernard Koltès's plays, such as *Combat de nègre et de chiens* (Black Battle with Dog) (1979) and *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* (In the Solitude of the Cotton Fields)(1985).

# Chapter 3

## Story of a Void
## Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles*

Chantal Akerman began to make movies under avant-garde auspices. When she was an adolescent, she saw, almost by accident, Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965):

> When I saw *Pierrot le fou* I was fifteen years old and I had no idea who Godard was… I didn't know a film could be a work of art … I walked into this film because I liked the title *Pierrot le fou*. I watched that film and it was so completely different, I felt like it was talking to me. It was poetry …. I walked out of the theater thinking "I want to make movies too[62]."

Then, in 1971 she traveled to New York and met the cinematographer Babette Mangolte who made her aware of the New York experimental movie scene. She watched films by Andy Warhol and Michael Snow among others.

> I saw the first screening of Michael Snow's film *La Région centrale*[63]. I realized then that without any story, you could still experience something emotional and palpable. You didn't need a story. Another fairly unknown movie by Michael Snow, *Forth and Back*, is childishly simple. In a classroom a

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[62] Chantal Akerman. "On *Jeanne Dielman*, Interview with Chantal Akerman, 2009, abbreviated Interview from now on.

[63] "Canadian director Michael Snow's *La Région centrale* (1971), one of the masterpieces of experimental film-making […] had a decisive impact on the development of her film aesthetic. […] The hypnotic quality of Snow's non-narrative documentary, a cosmic portrait of a barren mountain top in Quebec filmed through a rotating camera anchored to a tripod, revealed to Akerman the singular power to render the lyrical dimension of time and space without necessary recourse to words or story." Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester UP, 2010) 5-6.

> camera moves back and forth. And you are absolutely riveted, waiting to see if the camera pans further the next time. The suspense is as great as a Hitchcock movie … Suspense plays a role in lots of my films (Interview).

And indeed the first movie Chantal Akerman made in the United States with Babette Mangolte, *Hotel Monterey*, was a non-narrative yet suspenseful movie consisting of the visual of the inventory of the hotel by roaming from the hall to the last floor[64]. However, although she has continued to make experimental movies and documentaries all her life, Akerman's next movies were narrative. Her first fictional long feature movie, *Je tu il elle* (1975), tells of three moments in the life of a young woman (played by Akerman herself)[65].

*Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles*, shot the same year established the reputation of Chantal Akerman, then 25 years old. It is a movie built also around a narrative; Jeanne Dielman (played by Delphine Seyrig) is a middle-aged widow who supports herself and her teenage son (Jean Delacorte) by daytime prostitution in her home. On the third day, Jeanne experiences an orgasm and kills her client[66].

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[64] "The filmic structure is simplified to the extreme and reflects structural film-making's interest in time and perception: the camera scales the entire hotel building from ground floor to roof, beginning in the main lobby just before sunset and gradually moving upwards during the course of the night. […] In a strategy that paves the way for later works like *Jeanne Dielman*, the director uses the filmic space as her main visual metaphor of the existential condition of the destitute urban class that forms the hotel's clientele." Ibid., 23.

[65] *Je tu il elle* […] partakes in an exploration of female subjectivity that spans Akerman's entire oeuvre and will be brought to perfect fruition in the next work, the monumental *Jeanne Dielman*." Ibid., 31.

[66] The plot can be told in a more detailed manner. For example Sandy Flitterman-Lewis writes that it "involves the daily rhythm of Jeanne's household routine (beginning with dishwashing after pre-preparation of the dinner; reception of the client of the day; bathing; scrubbing the tub; making the bed; greeting her son; eating supper with him, and so on. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis. "What's beneath her smile? Subjectivity and Desire in Germaine Dulac's *The Smiling Madame Beudet* and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles.*" *Identity and Memory. The Films of Chantal Akerman*. Edited by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (Southern Illinois UP, 2003) 29.

Even though *Jeanne Dielman* has a narrative (which embarrassed Akerman —"I returned to Paris and to making narrative films, but I felt like a traitor. And when I wrote *Jeanne Dielman*, I thought 'This is total betrayal.'(Interview)[67]). *Jeanne Dielman* is a highly unusual movie that is not what it appears to be.

Without a beginning, a middle or an end in the classical definition of these terms—it starts in medias res and does not have a conclusion—the movie that shows three days in Jeanne Dielman's life, starts in the afternoon of the first day and ends in the evening of the third day, with a seven-minute shot of Jeanne sitting in her living room.

Experimental is the length and the temporality of the movie: it lasts 200 minutes and during these three hours and twenty minutes, Jeanne's life is shot in—almost—real time or what Akerman calls reconstituted time: "A minute on the screen seems to last five minutes, so we reconstituted the time to give the feeling of real time (Interview)."

This narrative that for Akerman is like a betrayal is unusual not only as far as time is concerned. The story itself is bemusing. Jeanne Dielman has a double life; she is a mother and a prostitute but nobody around her suspects her second activity. She could be called enigmatic if all her actions did not seem so straightforward. She has almost no interactions with people and therefore does not speak, except for the most mundane things (for example during the dinner, mother and son don't exchange one word outside of 'you should eat more, you look pale."). But there is an enigma: we do not know what she thinks although we look at her for hours doing

[67] On this question of betrayal she adds in the same interview: "I call Delphine [Seyrig] (…) and tell her I've written a script —for a narrative film, I tell her ashamedly. I showed her and she said okay."

different chores and therefore certainly thinking. We don't know either what she thinks when her life seems to unravel, and certainly not when she kills her client. Who is Jeanne Dielman? In a movie so minutely written, rehearsed and shot, the secrecy of the woman is what is the most fascinating.

The fact that the whole movie is about a woman, that it shows the routine of a woman's life, caused it to be readily placed in the category of feminist movies. Indeed, *Jeanne Dielman* shows what is usually elided in a movie: the daily gestures of a woman such as cleaning, shopping, cooking, making coffee and doing dishes. If Akerman concedes that she "made this film to give all these actions that are typically devaluated a life on film" (Interview), she adamantly denied having made a feminist movie.

On the other hand, *Jeanne Dielman* elides what is usually shown: the sex scenes with the two first clients are missing. Moreover, comparing the daily gestures that are shot in real time, the scenes where supposedly Jeanne turns tricks are cut in a way to give the spectator the physical feeling of the ellipsis i.e. the shortening of the plot duration of a film achieved by deliberately omitting intervals or sections of the narrative story or action[68].

> [The client and Jeanne] enter [the bedroom], and he closes [the door] after him. The camera remains facing the corridor and the door. Two seconds later the lights get darker abruptly in a faux jump cut that marks the passage to a

[68] An ellipsis is marked by an editing transition (a fade, dissolve, wipe, jump cut, or change of scene) to omit a period or gap of time from the film's narrative.

> later moment: Jeanne opens the bedroom door and leaves with the customer[69].

With the ellipsis and the jump, the viewer has the feeling that the movie skipped something, like when the regular beating of one's heart is disrupted and lapses a beat. It seems that the continuity is not respected even though it is probably an illusion since the camera is immobile. The time here is not reconstituted because the jump shortens it. In such a monotonous movie, these two ellipses are appalling.

Why did the director choose to tell the story of the banality of the middle class instead of the one of extraordinary lives? Why did she opt to shoot her movie *almost* as a feminist movie, a documentary, an avant-garde movie? Why did she elect these genres to finally subvert them? Why these ellipses? Why this structure?

*Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* can be described as a series of doublings on every level of the movie (structure, story, genre) and I will argue that in each of the couple, the more visible element has an added function: hiding the less visible one. At the level of the story, Jeanne is a housewife, but not only. The movie can be seen as a feminist film; indeed it is a film made by women, about a woman, shot in 1975, an active and enthusiastic feminist period. However it is not only a feminist film. In the same way, it is not a documentary but it documents the life of a woman. It is considered a realist even hyperrealist movie, yet it is metaphorical. I will argue that this dual structure points to another pair: the movie, *Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles*—the fiction that the spectator sees on the screen—, and another story that is absent, missing, but that Akerman

[69] Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens. Chantal Akerman's Hypperealist Everyday* (Duke UP, 1996) 74.

wants to make appear as an absent story. We will see that in the same way that the housewife hides the prostitute and the avant-garde film a narrative one, behind the banal story of Jeanne Dielman, there is the ghost of a story, a ghostly story that is invisible and can be distinguished sometimes in the transparency of *Jeanne Dielman*, from what is missing: in the jump, or the holes in the fiction—the ellipses. This missing, but appearing story is autobiographical or at least biographical. The ghost is showing an event that cannot be represented, told or even imagined because doing so is unbearable. The ellipses are pointing to the absence of a story—a void. I will argue that the feminist film is hiding (and revealing) a Holocaust film. This missing narrative is the story of Akerman's mother, silenced by the terror of the extermination camps.

The story of the void

Biography takes an important place in Akerman's work. She made a few autoportraits — *Lettre d'une cinéaste* (1984), *Portrait d'une paresseuse* (1986), *Autoportrait en cinéaste* (2004)… — and shot an important movie about her mother, *News from Home* (1976). In this movie, over long shots of New York (subway, streets…) that depict the sceneries of her daily life, the filmmaker reads, in English, letters written in French and sent to her by her mother.

The director's relationship to her Jewish heritage, although complicated, is very essential in her life and her work. For example, speaking of *Jeanne Dielman*, she says that Jeanne's ritual is not so different than most women—women have rituals— but even closer to her mother's rituals because it is similar to the Jewish

ritual (Interview); the Jewish day is much ritualized and the day is divided according to the ritual. Akerman remembers that she lived following this ritual until the death of her grandfather when she was eight. For that reason, she wanted Jeanne's discourse to recall the litanies sung in a synagogue.

Chantal Akerman was born in Belgium in 1950. Her parents were Polish Jews. Her mother, Natalia, was sent to Auschwitz with her parents. She was the only one to return. Like Sophie Bredier and in some measure Claire Denis, Chantal Akerman was confronted to her parents' silence about their past, silence that she regretted:

> People of my parents' generation told themselves: we are going to spare them the story of what happened to us … Instead of knowing my history by having it passed down directly from parents to child, I had to go through literature and read, for instance Isaac Barshevis Singer. But that wasn't enough. His memories could never really be mine. So, from one kind of borrowing to another, I am constituted by imaginary memories[70].

Even though *Jeanne Dielman*'s story doesn't seem to have anything to do with Natalia Akerman's, Chantal Akerman says about it: "I am talking about a woman I love who is my mother. All that is very ambiguous." (Bergstrom 107) And in an interview, she speaks with her mother about her movies[71]. About *Jeanne Dielman*, Natalia begins by saying: "I really like it (I adore that) when everything is clean and tidy." Chantal asks then:

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[70] Quoted by Janet Bergstrom. "Invented Memories." *Identity and Memory. The Films of Chantal Akerman*. Edited by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (Southern Illinois UP, 2003) 98

[71] "Interview with Akerman's mother, Natalia." in the DVD 2 (supplements) of *Jeanne Dielman*.

> Wouldn't you say that if I made this film about this obsessive woman whose whole world crumbles if the slightest thing changes it is related to the idea that if nothing changes nothing bad can happen? (…) Basically, for you and me, and other people I know in those moments when anxiety creeps in —I am not speaking only about women but also survivors after the war, who know that change can bring the worst.

To that Natalia answers: "People are afraid of change, people who went to war and lived through the war. We like to know what to expect, that nothing bad is going to happen because everything is continuing as usual." And prompted by her daughter, she says: "I don't know how to —That whole period is a big blank because I repressed and repressed it. I refused to think about it just to survive. so it's really hard to remember things now." But Akerman presses her mother: "From the little you told me when you were lined up in the concentration camps, you couldn't allow any change to show, like sickness or an injury. Everything had to be in order. Perhaps that need for order became internalized. Try to think for a minute about this need for order. I think there is something very basic there". And Natalia confides:

> We'd leave the camp in the morning to work outside the gates. We were happy to get out of the camp because horrible things happen there while you were gone. They'd make their "selections" Those left behind, those who could no longer work were selected and sent to the gas chambers. We were spared because we could work. So the day you weren't called for duty, you got scared. You never knew what might happen from one minute to the next."

*Jeanne Dielman* tells the story of a woman whose world is protected against chance (accident and fate) by obsessive routine. Nothing in her life is supposed to be unexpected and every grain of sand in the machine (here pleasure) produces mayhem. Metaphorically though, the movie is the story of the repressed that appears, a discourse that is out of place and so unbearable that it produces a metaphoric death.

Ten years prior to the wave of reflection on the representation of the Holocaust [72], Chantal Akerman alludes to the unbearable, the unimaginable, the non-representable through the absence of image. The ellipses in *Jeanne Dielman* testifie to the absence, the void, and the powerlessness of the image to express. In Greek, elleipein means to fall short.

The story of a woman

*Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* tells the story of three days in the life of a woman. It is written and directed by a woman, Chantal Akerman ("I grew up surrounded by women because my father had three sisters and my mother had three aunts. And we were always at this aunt's house or that aunt's house, so I saw all that." (Interview)), and is shot with an all-female team:

> It was important at the time that 80% of the team was women. But people didn't trust a woman cinematographer, for example. It was really considered a man's job. Female sound recordists practically didn't exist. There were script girls and women editors or in charge of wardrobe or makeup. But

[72] It is the same reflection that is behind Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). The unbearable, the scandalous is represented by absent images, ellipses.

there was no one for lighting. Quite a few positions were very much off-limits to women. So I wanted to show that it was entirely possible. So I did it (Interview)[73].

1975 is a year of feminism and the women's liberation movements. As Ivone Margulies says in "A Matter of Time" (in the brochure that comes with the DVD), "When it came out, *Jeanne Dielman* was fully in tune with the European women's movement — "Peeling Potatoes" was one of the articles in an issue of *Les Temps Modernes* edited by Simone de Beauvoir." The story of the film can be seen as the typical story for a feminist movie. "In its structural delineation of a link between two prescribed female roles — domestic and sexual, the mother and the whore — the film engages broadly with a feminist problematic, one that takes into account also a woman's alienation, her labor and her dormant violence" (Ibid.).

Although Akerman agrees that "I *do* think it's a feminist film because I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman,[74]" she has often discarded any direct equation of Jeanne's daily chores with a "woman's repression under patriarchy", explaining that "these were the loving gestures she was familiar with as she observed intently her mother and aunts[75]."

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[73] Margulies argues that the movie is aimed at a female audience (1996, 85). Sandy Flitterman-Lewis suggests the same, 34. I do not agree with this assumption as I will develop later in the paper.

[74] Kristin Butler, Bordering on fiction : Chantal Akerman's *From the East*." *Identity and Memory. The Films of Chantal "Akerman*. Edited by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (Southern Illinois UP, 2003) 162. Teresa de Lauretis says:" the narrative suspense … is produced by the … hesitations between real-time gestures as common and 'insignificant as peeling potatoes, washing dishing or making coffee. … What the film constructs – formally and artfully, to be sure–is a picture of female experience," 131.

[75] Margulies, "A Matter of Time." In the movie shot by Sami Frey « Autour de Jeanne Dielman, » Delphine Seyrig and Chantal Akerman speak about how to reproduce the gestures of the different

As we have seen above, Chantal Akerman said it at multiple occasions: it is a movie about her mother, or women like her mother. *Jeanne Dielman* is a movie on and about women because it is a film about one woman in particular. *Jeanne Dielman* is not only a movie about women who lived this trite middle life like Natalia Akerman, but women who, like her, kept silent. As Marsha Kinder notes:

> The most important omission is the access to what is going on inside of Jeanne's mind—there are no voice-overs, no soliloquies, no subjective inserts, and minimal dialogue. We see only her external surface and, if we are to understand her behavior and her experience, we must "guess the unseen from the seen. (6)[76]"

Indeed if this silence is the silence of repressed housewives, through this repression appears the repression of another story, of another discourse. The ghostly story ("the unseen") is the one that could not be uttered by one mother to her daughter: the deportation to Auschwitz.

As Schmid notices: "The film makes no explicit allusion to the camps, yet, eleven years later, in *Golden Eighties*, Akerman casts the same Delphine Seyrig as a Holocaust survivor liberated by an American GI and unhappily married to a businessman. Her name is Jeanne. (50)"

However, it is in the genre of feminist and avant-garde cinema that *Jeanne Dielman* has been placed and questioned. I think that Chantal Akerman has used

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aunts of Akerman. The conversations last for a long time on the model of: "Your aunt makes the schnitzels like that? Does she put one egg or two eggs?" etc.

[76] Marsha Kinder. "Reflections on Jeanne Dielman" *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4, (Summer, 1977), pp. 2-8. She refers here to Henry James.

what she knew and adhered to in avant-garde and feminist movies as a process to question both the position of the artist and her viewer and to reflect on "how to see the invisible", which is the other side of "how to show the invisible." The feminist film is not subverted to question feminist gesture, or even feminism, but to be able to offer a structure that could be seen through in order to guide the spectator to another narrative, this one visibly absent.

The role of the relay between the narratives is the ellipsis. The ellipsis is a figure *in absentia*. *In absentia* figures are not on the syntagmatic axis of the language —the axis of combinations—but on its paradigmatic axis—the axis of substitutions, of virtualities[77]. Therefore they are a rupture in the énoncé (statement), which in the fiction, attests to the missing event. We see here, not the esthetisation of the narration by the rhetoric, but to the narrativisation of the rhetoric itself.

For all these reasons, in this movie, the viewer plays a role that is not the one s/he plays in feminist movies or movies in general. S/He is asked, called, to see differently. S/He has to question her/himself what s/he sees in this void. The question is what does s/he see in this void.

The haunted spectator

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey contends that the Hollywood film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. The fear of castration and the sense of loss felt by the subject find a

[77] For the further development of this question, see *Fictions pour mémoire*, 1998, chapter 1.

satisfaction or pleasure through cinema. This pleasure finds its source through the narrative. She identifies two pleasures in cinema: voyeurism arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. Narcissism comes from the identification with the image seen.

As Christian Metz puts it, voyeurism is defined as the perceiving act (scopic and invocatory drives or image and sound) that concretely represents the absence of its object in the distance at which it maintains it. The voyeur maintains an empty space between the object and the eye. The obscurity contributes to voyeurism, the keyhole effect of the screen but also the solitude of the spectator[78]. The question of voyeurism has been thought about and addressed by Chantal Akerman.

> You know who is looking; you always know what the point of view is, all the time. It's always the same. … I let her live her life in the middle of the frame. I didn't go in too close, but I was not very far away. I let her be in her space. It's not uncontrolled. But the camera was not voyeuristic in the commercial way because you always knew where I was. You know it wasn't shot through the keyhole (Bergstrom 94).

Furthermore, like many critics have noticed, the camera is a little low, at the level of Akerman's eye. At the same time, the director expressed in many interviews that her movie is not a feminist movie but an Akerman movie. An Akerman movie is "attention to film form as an effective means of inquiring into discourse and the

[78] Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier." *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology. A Film Theory Reader*. Edited by Philip Rosen (Columbia UP, 1986).

relation of film to spectator" (Butler 168). She is the one seeing and it is through a gaze that the spectators see.

As far as the second source of pleasure identified by Mulvey, narcissism, it is linked with identification. Metz defines two types of identifications. The primary identification is the identification of the spectator's eye with the camera. The secondary identification is the one of the viewer with the character on the screen. This latter identification is impossible while watching *Jeanne Dielman* because Chantal Akerman shot the movie without reverse angle, close ups or point of view shots. The composition is frontal and symmetrical. Even when the mother and the son are speaking, they are both on screen. This technique added to the fact that there is no camera movement; no editing suture prevents all possibility of illusion. The spectator is never all perceiving; in other words he has no control over the subject. For the same reason—we know who is looking: it is the director — the primary identification cannot operate as in a classical narrative feature. The camera is the eye of the director. The spectator sees through her gaze and is reminded of it. On the contrary Akerman does not erase herself behind the camera. There is no other I than Akerman's eye.

This situation opens multiple original issues. The first one is the place of the spectator in the movie since s/he cannot identify with Jeanne or Sylvain. The second is: what is his or her relation with Jeanne Dielman on one hand and with Akerman's eye on the other?

Even though Jeanne Dielman could be read as an object of a male world, socially and economically dominated by both the lack of a man (she is widowed and

single) and by men (clients) and even though she looks like a blank screen where one could project his or her own desires, we have established that the technique of the movie (no reverse shot, etc.) contradicts this. The spectator (man or woman) has no control over the character. However, the viewer has a lot of time when s/he watches *Jeanne Dielman.* He can feel the beat of life given by the rhythm of the movie. As Akerman says: "Time is not only in the shot, it exits also in the spectator who looks at it. He feels, this time, in himself. Yes. Even when he pretends being bored. And even if he is really bored and that he waits for the next shot. To wait for the next shot it is already to feel alive[79]."

To feel alive yes, but more importantly to feel time, or even to watch time. To experience time. In *Jeanne Dielman*, the spectator has a different role than in mainstream cinema or even in feminist cinema. His privileged relation is with time. Time is elongated and what is at first unbearable (all this time when almost nothing is happening, or the same thing over and over) becomes an object of fascination and of reflection. Kinder tells that during the screening in Cannes, "Some people in the audience grow impatient and walk out …. Those who remain begin to realize that the entire film will move at this slow pace, that it is establishing new conventions." I agree with her and her realization that: "Our participation becomes more active; we begin to feel in control. … We have experienced the trap from the inside and, as a result, our own perception and consciousness have been expanded (8)." The participation and the control that Kinder mentions are a praxis. Her remarks remind me of what Sartre calls *littérature engagée*, i.e. a literature with a place destined to

[79] *Chantal Akerman, autoportrait en cinéaste.* (Editions Musée Georges Pompidou/Cahiers du Cinéma, 2004) 38, my translation.

the reader: "As for me who read, if I create and keep alive an unjust world, I can not help making myself responsible for it. And the author's whole art is bent on obliging me to *create* what he *discloses*, therefore to compromise myself (61)[80]."

The engagement that viewers were asked to embark upon when watching feminist films, is doubled—perhaps replaced—by the engagement of seeing and transmitting a ghostly story. It is through the avant-garde and feminist structures that Akerman calls to her viewers.

The second relationship of the viewer is space. But since the space is what is seen by the camera/eye, the experience of the space is a collaboration of the director and her spectator.

When we watch *Jeanne Dielman*, "each gesture and sound becomes imprinted in our mind[81]" then after "reading" the image of a woman washing dishes, one's attention starts to wander to tiles, to colors, to a rag. Because of this rhythm and the hypnotic quality of the movie, we are in turn filled in with muteness and emptiness. The silence, the void are projected onto us—man or woman. As de Lauretis affirms:

> The film's space is also a critical space of analysis, a horizon of possible meanings which includes or extends to the spectator ("extends beyond the fiction") insofar as the spectator is led to occupy at once two positions, to follow the two "logics" and to perceive them equally and concurrently true (133).

[80] Italics Sartre.
[81] Margulies, "A Matter of Time."

The situation of the spectator is unusual: because he is behind Akerman's eye, he or she "is forced to maintain a distance in relation to both narrative and image[82]." Kuhn continues by saying that through this process the spectator is constructing the story and building up narrative expectations for herself. I somewhat differ with this interpretation. Chantal Akerman keeps the spectator at a distance to make him build not his own narrative, but a story that is there, that is not visible to the naked eye, and has to be figured out[83]. She places the spectator in what has been called by most critics and Holocaust theory writers, the "crisis of the visible" and she poses the question of "regarding the non-appearance, the invisible within the visible[84]." In order to prevent the narrator from building a narrative that will be his or her own, that will prevent the ghost from becoming visible, Akerman directs him toward the missing story through her own gaze. As Fitterman-Lewis puts it:

> By asserting that the logic of vision, which organizes the shots and disperses the gaze is emphatically hers, [Akerman] foregrounds her own "view", and thus intervenes in the fictional world of the film. Yet, in order to do this, she foregoes any obvious strategy that would call attention to itself in a facile reflexivity. She makes her intervention at the level of the organizing gaze and, in doing so, reformulates … the look of the camera/author (32).

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[82] Annette Kuhn. *Women's Pictures. Feminism and Cinema* (Routledge, 1982) 174.

[83] Then, it is possible for the spectator to built a narrative from the ghostly story, but this is not the goal of putting him or her in this position.

[84] Jean-Michel Frodon. "Intersecting Paths." *Cinema & the Shoah. An Art Confronts the Tragedy of the Twentieth Century*. Edited by Jean-Michel Frodon. Translated by Anna Harrison and Tom Mes (State University of New York Press, 2010) 11.

The spectator cannot identity with the character that is on the other side of the door. He only can observe her when she is on the screen. However, he identifies with Akerman's gaze and knowledge. Two figures in absentia are at work in the movie: the ellipsis (what is happening in the bedroom?) and the metaphor: the closed door. And Akerman, like her spectator, is behind the closed door, not knowing or understanding what is happening behind it. Guessing, reconstituting a story. Like him, she is in front of a ghost.

Second-Generations and ghosts

Chantal Akerman is both the director and the narrator of the movie. She is the I who sees and the I who says. It is through her that something is not said, that something is missing. *Jeanne Dielman* is also the story of Akerman's gaze, in other words it is the story of something that has been missing, silent in her life. She projects on Jeanne Dielman, the character and the movie, something too outrageous to tell or show.

In *Jeanne Dielman*, the ghost gives a measure of space and time—both endless—to the narrative. This ghostly story is not unique to *Jeanne Dielman*. It appears, reappears, and wanders, in a lot of Akerman's movies. As Schmid says:

> In a process she calls ressassement (turning over)[85], and which she explicitly associates with a return of the repressed that haunts the second-generation Holocaust survivors, many of her films relentlessly revisit the traumatic

[85] As we can see Bredier, Denis and Akerman are dealing with their ghosts through ressassement.

> experience of her parents' generation whilst working with her own feelings of loss and uprootedness (2-3).

Artists of the second-generation of Holocaust survivors, not only wonder about the void and experience it, but also question it through art. Michel Deguy, speaking of *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, says: "Le film rapporte à la visibilité non pas l'événement tel qu'il fut, vécu jour par jour, et à quoi jamais en effet on ne pourra assister ni réassister, mais son attestation[86]."

In *Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles*, a film about a boring middle-age housewife that prostitute herself, the outrageousness of the time and the space, the fantastic of the fiction[87], attest to an event that cannot be grasped. In her movie, Chantal Akerman does not offer the possibility to incarnate the ghost. The ghost stays ghost, the story remains unsaid. It is only later, through the accumulation of movies, the ressassement that the viewer will go back, retrace his or her steps and see what is haunting him.

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[86] Michel Deguy. *Au sujet de Shoah. Le film de Claude Lanzmann* (Belin 2000) 6. The film brings to visibility not the event as it was, lived, day after day and to which never, in effect, we could attend or reattend to, but to its attestation (my translation).

[87] In *Jeanne Dielman* the murder scene is crucial in more than one way. … In the film's system, it is the murder scene that displays the highest degree of fictiveness; in doing so, it sets off the fictional element latent within the literalness of the domestic scenes —it foregrounds, in other words, the fictional and illusionary aspect of all the images (Margulies, 83)

# Conclusion

Was I just seeing ghosts? Or were the figures that I could discern in the traces, the images in excess, the repetitions, and the ellipsis actually ghosts? And if they were ghosts and not another marker, echoes for example, why did they appear in the movies of Sophie Bredier, Claire Denis and Chantal Akerman? And how? These were the questions that initiated this work.

I have showed ghosts that take many forms. But whatever form they take, ghosts are an artistic/filmic construction. They are figures that make the invisible visible while maintaining its invisibility. They are created by the artists in order to attest that a story has been silenced, a film not shot.

> Arrête de ressasser disait mon père et ne recommence pas avec ces vieilles histoires, et ma mère tout simplement se taisait, il n'y a rien à ressasser disait mon père, il n'y a rien a dire, disait ma mère. Et c'est sur ce rien que je travaille[88].

It is on this nothingness that Sophie Bredier, Claire Denis and Claire Akerman are working. And it is this nothingness that they keep bringing up. How to put nothingness in images? Precisely. Through ghosts.

In *Nos traces silencieuses* and *Séparées*, Sophie Bredier's ghosts are in excess: these inserts in 8mm are the ghosts of a story that has not been shot. We can see them also as the fictional images added to the thread of the documentary to provide

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[88] "Stop turning over, said my father, and don't start again with these old stories, and my mother, simply, was silent, there is nothing to turn over, my father was saying, there is nothing to say, my mother was saying. It is on this nothingness that I work." *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste* (Cahiers du Cinéma. Centre Georges Pompidou. 2004) 12-13.

reality in her story. Claire Denis could, like Bredier, be seen as looking for her origins—her movies *Chocolat* and *Beau travail* could also be seen as beginning with a research of the origins (memory, physical return to Africa). Like Bredier in Korea, Denis feels out of place in Africa and this discomfort brings forth ghosts. The ghosts appear in the repetition of the main characters in the movies and through them, the filmmaker is questioning her position and her responsibility as an artist. It is also an interrogation in Chantal Akerman's life that is responsible for freeing the ghost in her movie *Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles.* These ghosts attest to a story that has been hidden, the story of her mother's survival in Auschwitz.

Even though it seems that Bredier is more self-centered, the three filmmakers are conducting a questioning that passes from the individual to the collective. They transmit the question of the representation of a reality that is nonetheless unimaginable for them. As Camus says:

> L'art, dans un certain sens, est une révolte contre le monde dans ce qu'il a de fuyant et d'inachevé : il ne se propose donc rien d'autre que de donner une autre forme à une réalité qu'il est contraint pourtant de conserver parce qu'elle est la source de son émotion[89].

These sentences are part of the second discourse pronounced by Camus in Sweden, entitled "L'artiste et son temps" (the artist and his time). In both of the discourses, Camus reflects on the role and the place of the artist after the

[89] "Art, in a sense, is a revolt against everything in the world that is fleeting and unfinished. Consequently, its only aim is to give another form to a reality that it is nevertheless forced to preserve as the source of its emotion." Create Dangerously" A Lecture by Albert Camus. December 14, 1957 at the University of Uppsala in Sweden.

"catastrophe" (WWII). Similarly, Bredier, Denis and Akerman question their role as artists and as heirs of an extreme situation. The three of them feel out of place in their personal story because it has been truncated. To continue the image of the ghost, they roam their own stories. It is through their works of art, thus a collective and public representation of their stories that the three women take the responsibility to be at the service of the world. It is the creation of ghosts that make them *these* artists.

Like Orpheus who desires to contemplate Eurydice as she is in death and composes a poem of this passage, Sophie Bredier, Claire Denis and Chantal Akerman look back to see this nothingness, this nothingness that cannot be imagined. Like Eurydice is for Orpheus, "the presence of her infinite absence[90]," the ghosts in Bredier, Denis and Akerman's movies carry for and assume and make a film of this infinite absence.

[90] These words are Blanchot's in "Le regard d'Orphée" quoted in Richard H. Stamelman. *Lost Beyond Telling. Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry (*Cornell UP, 1990) 46.

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