Voyeuristic Representations of Displaced Desire in Claire Denis' *Beau travail*

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Claire Denis' *Beau travail* depicts the hazardous consequences of repressed, unfulfilled desire in a world governed by rigidity. The stark beauty of the desert landscape reinforces the bleakness of the key character and ex-officer Galoup's situation. The film interweaves images from Galoup's present solitary existence with flashback voice-overs from the past where Galoup (played by Denis Lavant) enjoyed the life of a respectable officer in the French Foreign Legion. The combination paints a bleak portrait of tenuously restrained violence where we see unfold Galoup's mounting jealousy and ultimate attempt to murder the young recruit Sentain (played by Grégoire Colin). Galoup's repression is artistically expressed through the voyeuristic images he presents as a result of his displaced desire to belong. This repression is expressed both in sound and imagery through the use of distance in two key elements: the temporal distance inherent in the present voice-over narration of past events and the physical visual distance between Galoup and the subject(s) of the narrative sequences. As an inevitable consequence of these temporal and spatial distances, the film exhibits a voyeuristic quality suggestive of Galoup's repressed sexual desire. Through comparison with the Herman Melville novel *Billy Bud* on which the film is loosely based and by drawing on film reviews as well as academic essays, an analysis of seven key scenes reveals that these distances and the resultant voyeurism are manifestations of Galoup's desire to belong. This desire stems from his perceived loss of what he previously viewed to be his role as the ideal Legionnaire and favorite of his commanding officer. The dual jealousy and desire that Galoup exhibits towards Sentain result from Galoup's frustration with a deficient sense of belonging. Consequently, Galoup directs his anger towards Sentain, who seems to possess all of the qualities that he himself lacks.

The theme of repression is evident from the beginning. From the moment the film begins, Galoup is cast in the role of observer in both professional as well as recreational settings. In the opening scenes, Galoup surveys the legionnaires while they perform training exercises. He plays the role of observer again while at the dance club in Djibouti. During this second sequence, Galoup wanders amidst the dancing throng of legionnaires and local women but is not invited to join in the dancing. Consequently, he appears awkward and disconnected from the throng, his movements stilted while his gaze roams across the faces surrounding him. His rigid, repressed movements contrast sharply with the flowing movements of those dancing close by. This scene establishes the impression of a rigidly composed Galoup who, while attempting to join the group, nevertheless distances himself from others and refuses to relax his self-control. Both scenes portray Galoup as distant and voyeuristic, as we will see through the recurring imagery of the nightclub, which appears at both the beginning and again at the end, and moments spent with the Djiboutian woman. These first scenes set the stage for the remainder of the film and in addition, reveal the importance of imagery over dialog, where the only sound in either sequence is the music.

The next scenes include voice-overs which, we later realize, emanate from Galoup's diary. The temporal distance established by the flashback interacts with the spatial distances revealed in the cinematography and Galoup's own narrative voice-overs. Through this story revealed in the present based on past entries in Galoup's journal, we witness a subjective viewpoint of events and glean a better sense of the principal character. All other characters in effect remain mysterious representations framed through Galoup's memory. As Charlotte O'Sullivan writes in *Sight and Sound,* "...the men in the army and the prostitutes who service them: they're all gorgeous, iconic and remote" (39). Deborah Young concurs, writing "the aesthetic approach. . . leaves the men's feelings and emotions strictly to the viewer's imagination" (89).

The use of voice-over narration plays a double role (Toubiana 30). In retelling the story from his point of view, Galoup gains control by reversing his role as the repressed and becoming the repressor. Galoup chooses which information and images to reveal according to his memory of past events while retelling his impression of these events in a subdued, dispassionate manner. In the text *Anatomy of Film,* Bernard Dick explains, "if the voice of the 'I' is flat and dispassionate, the

narration will have a distancing effect, which may be desirable in a film in which the characters are not empathetic" (Dick 24). Galoup does not want the audience to empathize with the other characters because he knows that he would inevitably be cast in the role of antagonist. Since the images adhere to the reality of these events, despite the power of Galoup to portray them in an unbiased and perhaps softer manner, Galoup seeks a means of allowing the images to speak for themselves without accentuating his negative role.

A comparison of Galoup's character to that of the petty officer in Herman Melville's novel *Billy Budd* will enhance our understanding of the ex-Legionnaire. The physical description of the petty officer Claggart in the novel portrays him as someone whose "complexion singularly contrast[ed] with the red or deeply bronzed visages of the sailors, . . . [and] seemed to hint of something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood" (Melville 24-25). Denis' Galoup likewise serves as a foil for the beauty of Sentain. As Charlotte O'Sullivan states, "where Denis Lavant's Galoup has a face as rough as a lion's, Grégoire Colin's Sentain's is as smooth as a stone" (O'Sullivan 39). The striking contrast between Galoup and Sentain is by no means accidental but the result of Denis' deliberate manipulation of imagery where outward appearance reflects the nature of the soul within. As in many of the films by Claire Denis, it is the imagery that carries more significance and is reinforced by dialogue to portray a purely physical vision of the world where "story is intimately tied to visual technique and character development is central to the film's rhythm and pace" (Marker 138).

As in the novel *Billy Budd,* the young recruit does not seem to recognize the evil intent of the officer nor does he understand the reasons for it due to his inexperience and perhaps incapacity to relate on a personal level with malfeasance. While Sentain strives for harmony in his environment and possesses complete self-assurance, Galoup lacks a personal sense of self-fulfillment and self-worth. As a result, the ex-officer lashes out at Sentain who seems, as Charles Tesson comments in *Cahiers du cinéma,* "sans tain" (sans taint—without taint/stain) (Tesson 47). The name "Galoup", which I would emphasize is suggestive of a wolf ("loup"), or rather, a "loup-garou" (werewolf), aptly describes his character. Galoup preys upon Sentain, toying with him because the young recruit is at his mercy. In Galoup's world, Sentain is innocent of any fault, except the unpardonable fault of seeming to excel at everything.

Whereas the novel creates imaginary scenes through the expertise of its text, Denis' film transfers words into imagery, with only limited dialog to enhance our understanding of those images. Galoup's voice guides us through the idealistic images of his life in the French Foreign Legion prior to the arrival of Sentain: daily chores, training exercises, and his perceived closeness with the commander Forestier. This idealization of his life in the Legion alters abruptly with the arrival of the new recruit Sentain. Galoup unabashedly explains through a voice-over narrative bitter with resentment that from the outset, it was apparent that Sentain did not belong in the Legion. For Galoup at least, "quelque chose de vague et de menaçant a serré le coeur" (something vague and menacing gripped his heart). However, the Legion's ready acceptance of this orphan and the interest that the commander exhibits towards him spark a smoldering jealousy in Galoup. Galoup perceives himself to be the epitome of the perfect Legionnaire, yet believes he has never experienced the total acceptance of his fellow Legionnaires as does Sentain. Moreover, the ex-officer recalls his admiration for his commanding officer Bruno Forestier but reveals resentment at the Commandant's apparent indifference towards him: "He knew I was a perfect Legionnaire and he didn't give a damn" (Grant 62). Moreover, his status as an 'adjudant' or sergeant major emphasizes his ambivalent nature, which is that of being between ranks, between two worlds (military and civilian), and between two individuals (Sentain and Forestier).

The distance that Galoup feels is placed in stark relief during the scene where the Legionnaires walk through the streets of Djibouti carrying one and then another of their group upon their shoulders. As Stéphane Bouquet remarks in the journal *Cahiers,* Galoup watches them from afar, dressed all in black, as if in mourning for his unrequited desire to belong to them (41). Galoup's voice is heard revealing the jealous thoughts that have displaced his desire to belong: "Ils portaient un des leurs en triomphe" (They carried one of their own in triumph).

Unlike the fighting British Navy of Melville's *Billy Budd,* the Foreign Legion of Denis' *Beau travail* does not face any immediate and real threat, except perhaps that of extinction. It is through this transfiguration of the military corp's purpose that Denis's free adaptation of Melville's novel reveals the most striking interpretation of the text. As Catherine Grant accentuates in her article comparing these two media, "Free adaptations. . .capitalize on difference. They are expected to

manifest innovation and ingenuity with regard to interpreting (and not translating) the narrative systems of their 'sources'" (Grant 58). Indeed, the Legionnaires perform their daily tasks with a ritual stoicism that seems to denude them of purpose. They repair the roads, but for the sake of the native Djiboutians, rather than for their own use. They no longer seem to work for any country, not to expand the antiquated French Empire nor to enforce order in that empire. A phantom army preparing for phantom battles, the only real function they have is to preserve appearances, as Forestier succinctly states, through the mundane chores of ironing their uniforms and polishing their shoes. The Legion has become, in fact, as Amy Taubin states in *Film Comment*, "a place where people who've never had a place can find a type of family, especially because they're not asked what they did before. Those boys who never belonged now belong together" (28).

Sentain, as a case in point, is quickly accepted by all including the paternal Forestier who, upon learning that Sentain is an orphan, calls him a "beau trouvaille." This scene, where the Commandant briefly encounters Sentain during his night-watch and discovers that the new recruit is an orphan, parallels a similar incident found in the novel, except that the French phrase "beau trouvaille" undoubtedly alludes to the title "beau travail." Indeed, one might conclude in retrospect that this scene foreshadows the relatively fortunate ending for Sentain where he is again 'found,' despite the evil machinations of Galoup.

Adding to Galoup's estrangement, not only is Sentain physically attractive and charming, he is an exceptional legionnaire, better than anyone else, including Galoup. As Tony McKibbin points out in *Film West*, the only heroic action in the film occurs when Sentain saves a crewman from a downed helicopter (53). Galoup, who assumed that Sentain would not "fit into" the Legion, is shocked into "a perversely profound realization: [he] isn't simply less attractive and less popular than Sentain, it's as if Sentain's way of being has usurped his own, that the Legion demands the desultory and casual over the rabid enthusiasm of a Galoup" (McKibbin 53). Galoup slowly begins to question his unyielding sense of rigidity even as his rancor against Sentain mounts.

While in another scene where Galoup meticulously sets the table for lunch while the legionnaires are exercising and then playing in the water, he envies Sentain's calm, available personality which, from his perspective, seems to attract the whole world. This thought seems to emanate from Galoup's present narration instead of from the diary

since soon after, he bitterly witnesses the group of legionnaires who carry Sentain from the water to assist him in removing a piece of glass that has lodged in his foot. Galoup's naked aggression is so apparent that one of the Legionnaires feels compelled to warn Sentain against the officer, or so Galoup imagines in the retelling of this memory as a result of his increasing sense of loss and abandonment from the group to which he used to feel he belonged.

Galoup counters a mounting sense of panic by zealously executing his daily tasks. He remembers his commander Forestier's comment from long ago that the elegance in uniforms and creases embodies the very elegance of the legionnaires ("L'élégance dans les uniformes et les plis comportent justement l'élégance des légionnaires"). Yet even Forestier tells him later that he pays too much attention to appearances. In her essay Cynthia Marker suggests that proper appearances can hide a monstrous interior, which in Galoup's case seems to be true (Marker 144). Galoup's rigid repression of his feelings begins to slip as well as he daydreams about facing off against Sentain within a circle of watching Legionnaires. Taubin mentions that the dynamic interplay of desire and repression results in repression intensifying desire while perverting it (Taubin 28). The panoramic shots of the Legionnaires performing their training exercises, naked torsos gleaming in the sunlight, represent to Galoup his memory of the coherent group of Legionnaires coexisting in an enjoyable, homo-erotic sphere of camaraderie, which Galoup has himself never experienced. While more muscular than the young Legionnaires, McKibbin notes that Galoup seems to "belong less to homo-erotic expectation, than to an embattled, bitter and brittle warrior" (McKibbin 53). His embraces appear more warlike, rigid and tense with tightly leashed energy, ready to crush the man to him, literally, at the slightest provocation. He later relishes his perceived success in 'crushing' Sentain by having him sent off into the desert with a faulty compass, but his elation is short-lived.

At the conclusion of Galoup's story, it is important to recall a statement he made at the very beginning: "Il y a de la liberté dans le remords (There is freedom in remorse.)." The personal reflection on events permitted as a result of the distance of time, coupled with the physical separation of Galoup's spatial distance from the Legion, have allowed him to review the events that transpired with a more critical eye. At last acknowledging his jealousy and desire, his thoughts have turned morose with only a trace of the old bitterness remaining. The

final scene of him dancing alone in the nightclub is a testament to his acceptance of the fact that he will never achieve the feeling of belonging that he so desired. Any chance of that is gone and he must be comfortable being alone. In stark contrast to his reticent dance movements in the opening scene, Galoup now releases all the rage and pent up frustration that a catharsis allows through the soothing activity of dancing with total abandon. It is as if "suddenly all the elements we've seen up to now—caged beast, clockwork toy, villain—blaze manically into life. With movements that are almost spasms, Lavant turns Galoup's body into something that takes up space rather than watches others encroach" (O'Sullivan 39). His body seems to turn convulsively into itself as if to mark his suffering as he rolls on the ground, then leaps into the air only to plunge back to the floor again as he continues this eccentric dance in celebration of life while the credits begin to roll. It is both an acceptance of his freedom and a fight against this freedom because, as Charlotte O'Sullivan reminds us, "Repression can't be undone in a day" (O'Sullivan 39).

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Silence and the Unsayable in Lorca's *Doña Rosita la soltera*

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> In plays of inaction, when nonprogression in language [...], combined with confined settings, underscores the sensation of entrapment, silent response and muteness reinforce the portrait of man as not merely estranged from his world, but entrapped in the hell of the self. As a metaphor of solitary confinement, silence confirms man's inability or unwillingness to relate to others and his concomitant torture by exclusion.
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> Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Spoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (24)

Perhaps due to postmodernism's broad sense of skepticism regarding the power of language and the growing loss of confidence with respect to that medium of communication (Steiner 12-35), the last twenty years have seen an exponential growth in interest within precisely that area that many consider to be the lack of language: silence. Not surprisingly, literary critics have been quick to begin their explorations of manifestations of silence within a wide range of genres. Leslie Kane's pioneering study *The Language of Silence: On the Spoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* is one of the best examples of this kind of investigation. In her analysis of the dramatic production of various twentieth-century playwrights, Kane utilizes a wide-ranging definition of silence as she shows how "[t]he fluidity of silence allows the artist to journey to the depths of the psyche, to exteriorize, dramatize, and emphasize what the Symbolists termed *l'état d'âme*" (14). Because she categorically refuses to confine silence to its limiting meaning of an "absence of language" (15), Kane gives herself enough wiggle-room to explore explicit