

J'ai pas sommeil: Transcript

Broken Connections: music at the damaged heart of J'ai pas sommeil (Claire Denis, 1993)

Who would sympathise with a serial granny killer, especially someone who murders helpless old ladies to feed his drug lifestyle? And what if the killer is also black and gay? These questions confront the viewer of Claire Denis' *J'ai pas sommeil*.

Claire Denis is a French film-maker with the status of an auteur. Her work is routinely released in this country, but she is not especially well known here. She has made 11 feature films to date, as well as numerous short films and documentaries. Her output is the subject of significant critical attention, with four books dedicated to her films (two in French and two in English), and another about to be published. She also features in a host of articles, as well as other books – on French film in general, or on genre subjects like cinema of sensation, or the post-colonial.

One of the reasons her work is less well known in this country may be because it is hard to classify. In my view that is because the films actively resist being put into a category. Sometimes, the release of a new Denis film causes a scandal. This was the case with her latest feature, *Les Salauds*, which was the subject of a furore at Cannes in 2013. And the same was true in the case of the film I want to talk about today, *J'ai pas sommeil*, which was released in 1994.

One of the issues surrounding *J'ai pas sommeil* is that it was based on a real-life crime story – what the French call a *fait divers*. The real-life story was that of Thierry Paulin, gay,

promiscuous, drug-using, HIV-positive, whose notoriety derived from a series of murders of elderly women committed by Paulin and his partner to finance their lifestyle. Claire Denis' film takes that story and examines it in a light which seeks to understand how it might have happened, but to do so in a way which does not deal in blame or stigmatisation.

Surrounding the central narrative are implications which touch on a number of significant issues for modern-day France. These issues include race, identity, prejudice and exploitation. This is prefigured early in the film when we see Daïga, a Lithuanian arriving in Paris, at the start of the film. She has left her homeland in the search for a new life. As such she embodies the idea of disconnection which is at the heart of a song by Jean-Louis Murat which is central to the film. Murat is a musician with a reputation as a loner and an outsider. His music is very personalised – in a way comparable to that of Leonard Cohen – but his songs also touch on questions connected to French society. Murat's song, 'Le lien défait', is important for two reasons: first for what it says about the deracination of the main characters; and second, for its performative context.

'Le lien défait' – which translates as something like 'the broken tie' or 'the loosened knot' – is a song about a damaged relationship. At that level it is very apt to the life of the central character, Camille. But the song carries other layers of significance which are brought out in the film. These relate to a general failure of individuals to sustain meaningful relationships. This implies serious flaws in a society which is composed of people who cannot connect with each other.

We don't get much sense of this right at the start of the film. Daïga's arrival is accompanied by snatches from Dean Martin's 'Relaxez-vous' – an easy-listening number with a welcoming feel.

The song suggests that Daïga has escaped from whatever constrained her at home in Lithuania, and that she has reached an easy-going environment in which she will be able to shape her own destiny. But there are deeply ironic undertones in play here. The casual approach to moral issues implied in the song takes on a darker side when we see characters later on engaging in criminal behaviour, including murder.

A further level of irony is that 'Relaxez-vous' is complicit with the apparent personality of Camille, who comes across as laid-back, polite and engaging. But Camille is a robber and murderer of elderly women. His amoral behaviour is concealed beneath a languid air of affability which provides a veneer of 'gentillesse', attested to by everyone (including his potential victims).

We as viewers get a better idea of what Camille is up to, and are able to go behind the implications of 'Relaxez-vous'. Even so, we get relatively little insight into Camille's personality – until the performance of 'Le lien défait'. Up to that point, he comes across as a bit shy, and someone most unlikely to get up on stage before an audience.

Camille's performance is even more surprising because he wears a dress. He normally dresses smartly in male attire, and the wearing of a dress brings home sharply the idea of conflict in his life, and of his having another, concealed, form of existence.

Conflict and dissatisfaction come out strongly in his performance of 'Le lien défait'. The song speaks of the desire for permanence, always frustrated; the perversion of the natural world; and it carries implications of post-colonial trauma. It is the one occasion in the film where Camille appears to really care about something as he puts his heart into the song. His performance marks him out as someone who feels alienated: he is unhappy with his life and its surroundings.

In the final verse of the song (repeated from the middle) his longing is made explicit:

on se croit d'amour	you believe yourself in love
on se sent épris d'éternité	you feel smitten for ever
mais revient toujours	but the time always comes
le temps du lien défait	when the tie is severed

Seen as a love song, Murat's words chime in with the fair-haired character of Camille's lover and partner in crime ('like a blond angel'), and the ambivalent, sometimes violent nature of their relationship ('like a demon'). At a deeper level the lyrics resonate with Camille's feelings of isolation. In the third verse it is the desire for anchorage ('féroce enraciné') which is thwarted as the 'temps du lien défait' negates any sense of deep-rootedness. The post-colonial emerges in the reference to 'Jeanne de France' and the juxtaposition of 'la reine des prés' (queen of the meadows) with 'morte terre' (dead earth).

In these wider aspects, the words embraced by Camille also point to his brother Théo, a carpenter, who, tired of being patronised and short-changed by people, dreams of emigrating to the Antilles, their mother's homeland. It seems significant that the performance of 'Le lien défait' is bookended by two scenes in which Théo and his wife discuss his repatriation plan. The two of them, together with their son, are sleeping on the roof – under the open sky. This is a kind of symbolic rejection of urban life and it contrasts with the louche atmosphere of the club where Camille is on stage.

Théo's reasons for leaving form part of a triangular connection in the film which takes us back to Daïga, who will similarly tire of being treated like a skivvy. She will be the one who actively cuts loose. At the end of the film she decides to give up on the community of ex-pats and their struggles to keep up their ancestral ways while living in France. So Daïga performs

a double breaking of the link: first, from her native land, and second, from the new homeland which has declined to embrace her.

Her connection with 'Le lien défait', is, like that of Théo, an implicit one. She is not present at Camille's performance. But in another, later, pivotal scene she and Camille make a fleeting personal connection (she follows him; he pays for her drink). It is clear that this brief flash of something close to intimacy will not last, and this new-forged link will be broken before it is established. This scene is distant (in the film) from the club performance and has no direct connection with it, but it operates as an echo of the song's sentiments of broken bonds by showing us two people, each deeply conscious of their own state of disconnectedness, and both equally unable to bridge the gap between them as individuals.

As a matter of language, Murat's words are freighted. The verb used for the breaking of ties is *défaire*, which carries connotations of dismantling and suppression. Four of the eight verses contain the song title: 'le temps du lien défait'; the other four end with the line: 'tu déferas le tien' – meaning something like: 'you will let go what you have'. The use of the future tense conveys a sense of inevitability: any meaningful connection made is always going to be broken; the moment of the break is bound ('*toujours*') to come. The references to demon, blind bird, viper and dead earth as omens of the unavoidable breaking suggest the perversity of what will happen, and they stand in stark contrast to the underlying desire to maintain connection: '*féroce enraciné*' (fiercely rooted) and '*épris d'éternité*' (committed for ever). Perhaps most forcefully, the second verse speaks of the insanity of destruction: '*dans ta démente/tu déferas le tien*' (in your madness/you will break with your own). This sense of coming loss which cannot be prevented even extends to the sexual relation: in the verse:

comme la femme douce	like the soft woman
comme l'homme léger	like the gentle man
au moment d'oublier	at the moment of oblivion
tu déferas le tien	you will break the chain

This imaging of a perverted natural world together with the perversity of human conduct is claustrophobic. Camille has no way out of this predicament. Others – Daïga, Théo – may be able to leave but Camille is trapped. There is a sense in which 'Le lien défait' is reflexive: the second person references could be to himself – so it may be that the song contains, for him, elements of self-accusation. In that case, the ideas of perversion and madness which lead to the senseless destruction of relationality would stem from his own doing.

This is quite likely because Claire Denis always focuses on the varieties of human contacts and disconnections and she never shows interest in the representation of pure blame or pure innocence. We can accordingly read the song lyrics as including Camille along with the other aspects of his life which find representation in the song.

There is also the outsider status of Murat himself to consider. A singer-songwriter with a loner disposition and a strong streak of romanticism, his writing of the title song 'J'ai pas sommeil' as well as 'Le lien défait' brings to Denis' film a flavour of loss and of melancholy. This helps to balance the noir elements of fait divers, the sensational real-life aspects of the plot, and the underlying themes of oppression, racism and loss of identity. The music of Murat not only rounds out the character of Camille by countering its stereotypical associations (gay, addict, robber, murderer, racial minority, slacker) and giving his personality an element of coherence and sympathy, it also, by aligning him with a well-known living performer, brings in a flavour of solidity, of connection with the real world.

Notwithstanding the quality of Murat's song 'Le lien défait', it is its conjunction with Richard Courcet's performance in the film which gives the club scene such impact. The degree of self-exposure (body and soul) in the performance is extremely striking. There is a true sense of the artist being lost in the moment. Camille comes across as transported, free and regardless of his surroundings. Everyone in the club stops what they are doing to watch. But even so there is no connection between artiste and audience. The silent, staring watchers behave much as they might if an alien had landed: shocked, puzzled, wary, even hostile. Camille for his part has no interest in them – this is not a case of someone holding the audience in the palm of his hand, rather the performance is for himself. Despite his moving among the watching men, he makes no contact with anyone, either by touch or look. His tactility is reserved for the walls and the air -his gestures to emphasise the song's words and his caressing of surfaces to display that his sensuousness is not for sharing.

Performativity is all. Crucially, Camille does not actually sing, but mimes to Murat's voice. The intensity with which he does so makes the song his own for the time being. But this is yet another tie which will be undone; a dream which has to end. We are shown no audience appreciation when the song finishes and the film cuts back to Théo and his family. The performance stands entirely on its own. Its resonances tremble throughout the film. Even to the end, when we feel sure that Camille's crime spree will end with a judicial version of 'Le lien défait' – his execution. What remains is the element of soul which went into Camille's delivery of Murat's lyrics.

On the subject of music in film generally, critics have suggested that music can step in where language leaves off, by providing nuances which narrative and dialogue struggle to convey. And also that music can anticipate something which is not yet in the image. What we have in *J'ai pas sommeil* fits well with those ideas. The images and the dialogue in this film only tell

us part of the story. The music gives a heart to what would otherwise be a gloomy saga of low life. The hearts in *J'ai pas sommeil* may be broken ones, but that is perhaps better than no heart at all. And what the music does – ‘Le lien défait’ especially – is to point up the issues of longing and loss, and of deprivation and exclusion, which are suggested throughout the film.