



## Ecologies of debt in Claire Denis's *L'Intrus/The Intruder* (2004)

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### ABSTRACT

In reading Claire Denis's *L'Intrus*, the author enters into a dialogue with two recent publications that consider her cinema in light of contemporary discussions on ecology and economy: Laura McMahon's work on the 'ecological impulse' at play in Denis's films and Rosalind Galt's analysis of the way in which Denis's 'default cinema' resists contemporary neoliberal formations. The author examines the complex notions of indebtedness that shaped the film and its production. Moreover, she explores how the idea of nature in *L'Intrus* appears as a construct in which economic and ecological relationships of debt are mediated through imaginaries of place. Rather than proposing new ecological or economic imaginaries, she argues that *L'Intrus* is a significant ecological text precisely because it makes legible how debt-ridden imaginaries of nature intrude upon another and affect the experience of places and the policies that regulate them. Furthermore, *L'Intrus*'s complementary depiction of imaginaries of the South Sea islands and the Northern mountain forest suggests that the imagined relationship to a place that is unknown and far away is dependent upon an imagined relationship to the natural environment that is familiar and close by.

### KEYWORDS

Claire Denis; nature; environment; ecology; economy

In oblique images of places and a series of dreamlike sequences, Claire Denis's *L'Intrus/The Intruder* (2004) tells the story of Louis Trebor (Michel Subor), who lives secluded in the Jura Mountains at the French/Swiss border. After suffering a mild heart attack, Trebor opts for the 'emergency solution'. He abandons his hut, his dogs, his lover, his son and his family and leaves for Geneva, where he clears his safety deposit box to acquire a new heart under shady circumstances. Following the operation, still struggling with the intruder grafted into his body, he buys a ship in Korea and voyages to Tahiti to gift the boat to a son he has never met. *L'Intrus* stages the dream of a voyage that has a clear trajectory from North to South, mapping ideas of place and self onto locations that are far apart. 'The two sides of the globe, the north hemisphere and south hemisphere,' Denis notes, are offered 'as the two sides of the heart' (Smith 2005). Her guiding question – 'What is a little valley of the North hemisphere as opposed to the blissful islands of the South Pacific?' (Smith 2005) – introduces an axiom of global interconnectedness that further complicates the relationship between interior and exterior space.

Interconnectedness has emerged as an important trope in recent ecological debates. In the face of growing environmental crisis caused by anthropogenic climate change, scholars across the humanities and social sciences have called into question the modern divide between nature and culture and challenged the privileged space this worldview assigns to the human (Bennett 2010; Latour 1993). Rather than relegating nature to the background as a separate realm 'over there', much contemporary ecological thought emphasises the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman beings, 'the entangled relations between human and nonhuman worlds' (Rose et al. 2012, 1). Yet, as ecocritical scholars informed by postcolonial theory have cautioned, rethinking the relationship between human and non-human – a binary closely linked to Western epistemologies to begin with – also requires an analysis of intra-human and global power relations as well as different cultural understandings of nature (DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan 2015, 12). In order to acknowledge and understand 'our own limitations of vision', the authors maintain, 'it is crucial to identify how histories of imperialism have shaped ways of seeing the environment' (15).

*L'Intrus* evokes Trebor's vision of the world. Driven by anxiety, he is unaware of his environment and neglects and exploits those around him. Each image of the film attests to the disconnect between his environment, the world he is part of, and his perceptual horizon, the way in which he perceives his environment. A cosmopolitan citizen at home in the Global North, he can be described as an agent of Empire, 'thriving', as Martine Beugnet has put it, 'in an era of intensified transnational circulation and deregulated greed' (2007, 77). Yet, far from thriving, he is guided by his failing heart. By presenting Trebor's surroundings as 'a vision of a place' rather than describing actual landscapes (Smith 2005), *L'Intrus* offers a rich resource for reflection on how perceptions of nature and environment are caught between immersion, ideation and disregard. The key to the film's commentary on political ecology lies in its depiction of the discrepancy between Trebor's vision of place and the environments he finds himself in.

My reading of *L'Intrus* examines the complex interconnections of the film's two major themes: the idea of 'nature' and the matter of debt. Both issues are threaded through a concern with global political ecology that entails a dialogue with two recent discussions: Laura McMahon's work on the 'ecological impulse' (2014, 1) at play in *L'Intrus* and *Beau Travail* (Claire Denis, 1999) and Rosalind Galt's analysis of the way in which Denis's 'default cinema' resists some of the assumptions of contemporary neoliberalism (2014, 100). Each author situates her reading in front of the backdrop of contemporary global crises: ecological crises in the case of McMahon, economic crisis in the case of Galt. My paper proposes that *L'Intrus* enables us to think ecological and economic crises in conjunction. By interweaving explorations of nature and debt, the film renders narratives of debt in ecological terms. Framed within Trebor's field of vision, *L'Intrus* reveals how modern imaginaries of nature are embroiled in global ecologies of debt.

Debt is an important feature of several of Denis's recent films. In *35 Rhums/35 Shots of Rum* (2008), debt takes centre stage in a classroom discussion on Third World debt. The critique that debt is used as a means to dominate the Global South is brushed over by the teacher, framing debt merely as a subject of analysis, not politics. 'But debt is relative,' another student interjects, pointing out a question also central in *L'Intrus*: 'What debt do we even mean?' if we consider the histories of colonialism. *Les Salauds/Bastards* (2013) unravels the disturbing aftermath of the deeds done by a family in the grip of debt, involving incest, rape, suicides, betrayal and murder. Here, relationships of debt stay within the metropolis and

play out among the Parisian elite who, while living in the city, do their dirty business in the suburbs. Trebor reappears in the figure of financier Eduarde Laporte (also played by Michel Subor). But unlike Trebor, he is shown to be impervious to debt himself, acting, instead, as the creditor pulling the strings.

Galt sees a particular 'mode of default' at work in *L'Intrus* and *35 Rhums* that resists the neoliberal script and homogenising demands dominating contemporary transnational film circuits through an 'aesthetics of refusal' (2014, 96). She understands default 'as a heuristic' in some of Denis's recent films, an assessment that has been both confirmed and complicated by the centrality of debt in *Les Salauds*. Maurizio Lazzarato's bleak outlook on the neoliberal condition in *The Making of Indebted Man* (2012) is the primary reference point for Galt's discussion of debt, but also her point of contention. For Lazzarato, debt within the European and the US-American 'new economies' operates not only at the very basis of social life, deeply affecting both material realities and concepts of self, but also functions as a calculated device – rather than by-product – of neoliberal social reorganisation in service of dismantling the remainders of the welfare state. But if default is the financial system's ultimate threat, Galt contends, it also works against the system itself by threatening to bring it down. What does it mean, then, to reject the terms, disown the blame and refuse to pay?

Without claiming Denis as a queer filmmaker per se, Galt situates Denis's cinema within a discourse of queer theories of globalisation and democracy that – in contrast to a neo-Marxist dismissal of identity politics in favour of class politics – sees issues of identity, desire and style as crucial to critiques of neoliberalism. Turning the system's constant threat of default against itself by refusing to pay its due, Denis's default cinema thus disrupts the narrative economies of both classical cinema and neoliberal representational regimes through a double movement: it renders visible the very connections between racialised, gendered, economic and national positionalities that neoliberal frameworks seek to obscure, and it does so in a form that eschews dominant modes of story-telling. 'Denis's films,' Galt suggests, 'perform this doubled work of revealing and refusing meaning across the circuits of world cinema' (2014, 100).

Galt's re-evaluation of concepts of debt through the representational strategies of Denis's films is intriguing. However, I want to shift the focus slightly and conceptualise debt in the context of recent debates on ecology. Thinking about the impact of debt predominantly in economic terms, as Tom Cohen and others have argued, directs attention away from the ecological implications of neoliberal resource extraction. The threat of default, in other words, impacts the biosphere as much as the world of finance (2012, 14). In danger of becoming naturalised as mere routine occurrences, so the argument goes, ecological disasters and abuses have to be addressed within a wider critique of global capitalism. At the same time, the proliferation – and impending exhaustion – of notions of crisis haunting both contemporary public debate and theoretical discourses point to larger problems regarding the ways in which contemporary ecological and economic disasters are conceptualised and experienced. For Cohen, the complex intersection of economic and ecological disaster seem 'caught in a self-defeating default,' which calls into question the fraught metaphoric complex of the *oikos* as home and, by extension, the understanding of an ecology that requires protection and saving (14–15). This echoes recent proposals from across the humanities and social sciences insisting that holistic conceptions of ecology inherited from the early environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the romantic or pastoral notions

of nature and the modes of cognition they imply, are in need of revision (Heise 2008; Latour 2004a; Morton 2008).

But debt is hit by an ecological crisis that goes much deeper. 'The "Sovereign debt crisis"; Cohen asserts, 'corresponds to a credibility crisis as well' (2012, 15). This crisis not only affects the political and economic operation of states but also fundamentally challenges interpretative assumptions and methodologies previously taken for granted in the humanities. This becomes apparent in the very difficulty that attends most forms of reckoning with contemporary ecologic issues. The on-going struggle to respond to the large-scale environmental effects caused by developments such as global warming – whether by scholars, scientists, politicians or the public at large – precipitates the need for a 'critical climate change'.<sup>1</sup> For Cohen, this failure to address collapsing ecosystems, species extinction and resource depletion stems from the preoccupation with 'the defense of cultures, affects, bodies and others', a preservation of critical protocols he regards as unsustainable entitlement (15). Tellingly, Cohen's wholesale, if *en passant*, dismissal of cultural politics, theories of affect and post-colonial critique mirrors the repudiation or relegation of identity politics by prominent leftist critics such as David Harvey or Frederic Jameson, that troubles Galt. Indeed, in thinking about Denis's films, one could say that the nexus of 'cultures, affect, bodies, and others' is the very fabric of her cinema. If we are to take into account the queer theories of globalisation that Galt mobilises for her reading of Denis's cinema, then, it becomes clear that little is won by replacing an analysis focusing on class with one determined by the environment, simply switching the focus from economy to ecology. Clearly, it is important to reconsider the ways in which we relate to both physical and textual environments, as contemporary ecological theories demand. But the answer cannot be that environmental concerns erode critical engagement, neglect difference or displace questions of social inequalities.

If issues of identity, as Galt points out, 'are not distractive for [Denis], but are, rather, the terrain on which politics happen' (2014, 99), we might in turn ask – in somewhat broader terms – what is the terrain on which questions of identity and belonging play out and how is it imagined and experienced in her films? In order to bring the ecological into the equation, I propose to think of 'terrain' here in the sense of 'cinematic territory', a term Denis has used to describe the cinematic space that opens up between a physical location and its imaginaries, the 'mysteries' that surround it (2011, 17).

Denis's film owes its title and main inspiration to Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Intrus* (2000), an autobiographical text reflecting on his heart transplant and – moving beyond his own body – what it means when humanity 'de-natures and re-fashions nature' (13). While modern medicine may defer one's debt to nature, *L'Intrus* complicates this seemingly technological exchange through the clandestine circumstances under which Trebor acquires his new heart from the black market, thus situating the transaction explicitly within an uneven global economy. At the same time, what figures as the natural within this geopolitical space and who or what participates in it, is put under close scrutiny. For McMahon, *L'Intrus's* critical contribution to contemporary ecological debates, its 'ecological thinking' (2014, 12), unfolds through a series of scale shifts that connect geopolitical spaces with geological terrains and interweave human with nonhuman histories, thus destabilising the notion of the natural. She examines *L'Intrus's* exploration of nonhuman pasts and futures – ranging from geological formations and atmospheric movements to the sensory world of canine perception – that accompanies its complex engagement with individual and collective desires, histories and politics. 'Yet by rescaling any uniquely human perspective,' she writes, the film also displays

'a nonanthropocentric detailing of the coexistence of body and landscape, and a democratic attentiveness to the distributed agencies of humans, animals and things' (2). By mapping different scales of time and space onto each other, McMahon argues, *L'Intrus* develops a multifaceted 'grammar of scale shifting' (12). Low-angle shots of trees in the Jura and Tahiti, for instance, intimate Trebor's point of view but simultaneously suggest a much bigger nonhuman presence. Bodies are drawn up-close while the landscape extends; 'smooth geometric spaces of capital' intrude upon 'the wild, violent territory of the Jura' (12). Indeed, she writes, 'the film's ecological impetus is linked to its formal movements between scalar imaginaries' (12).

To further explore *L'Intrus's* contribution to ecological thought, I want to take a closer look at the imaginaries that are evoked within these scale shifts. For the film's 'rescaling of our vision' – of putting a uniquely human point of view into a planetary, non-anthropocentric perspective, so to say – becomes ecologically meaningful precisely through its careful attention to the conflicting conceptions of nature and the environment at play within these scalar imaginaries. This is important because the environmental imaginaries that *L'Intrus* discerns are not uniquely human but embody a European perspective. Thus the film's ecological thinking is also concerned with the ways in which relationships to non-human worlds, and the geopolitical histories in which they are embroiled, are mediated through ideations of nature and place that are culturally and historically situated.

The wild territory of the Jura, for instance, is but one of a range of images the film frequently returns to that presents the European wild of the Jura as an idea rather than an actual place. *The Intruder* is careful not to invest uncritically in the "natural"; as McMahon notes (6), and yet this is an image that initially elicits dominant modes of environmentalist thinking that have 'set up "Nature" as a reified thing in the distance,' as Timothy Morton puts it, 'preferably in the mountains, in the wild' (2010, 4). In his study on landscape in Denis's cinema, Henrik Gustafsson has connected the fantasmatic spaces in her films to the perspective of the coloniser. Her films frequently 'mobilize a whole repertoire of colonial fantasies,' including 'palm-fringed island' and 'mountains shrouded in mist' (2014, 212). Images of landscapes, in other words, that perform the ideological work of conjuring places where 'nature' is thought to reside, remote and unspoiled. In order to understand how the idea of the natural figures in *L'Intrus*, as McMahon and Gustafsson attempt to do, we need to unpack how the film renders visible ideas of place and what it tells us about how landscapes are made, perceived and represented in debt-ridden relationships (*pace* Galt). As we shall see, *L'Intrus* reveals 'nature' as a construct in which economic and ecological relationships of debt are mediated through imaginaries of place and self.

Already at the level of production, complex notions of indebtedness entwine collaborative processes, aesthetic decisions and environmental circumstances. Within this process, environmental imaginaries in *L'Intrus* are shaped by economic and ecological realities that work together. The filmmaker acknowledges the cinematic gains and losses of a low-budget feature in the script-writing process, when she responds to using distant locations by dispensing with narrative coherence and reducing the number of technicians. The elliptical structure of *L'Intrus*, Denis suggested in an interview, is at least partially due to budget constraints: 'While writing you know what it costs [...] so, then you have to choose what you will save in a narration' (Davis 2004). This is not to say that Denis's cinema simply defaults to elliptical storytelling under economic pressure. Rather, cutting back on narrative instils a sense of urgency and creates an obligation for cast and crew who now 'owe' it to themselves, to the

director and to the film to bring across and capture in one scene a range of emotion that would otherwise have to be built up over time.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, Denis has also acknowledged the hardship that comes from travelling on a low budget, and on this account she is certainly indebted to her crew, collaborators and the film's producer who join her for an extended cinematic journey to different locations across the globe. Collaborative working relationships developed over a long period of time allow Denis to see through a transnational production on a budget that would otherwise be untenable within a global neoliberal economy.

The ecological dimension of this mode of production comes to the fore in the film's intersection with the physical environment and the environmental imaginaries it generates. Shot primarily on location, Denis's cinema also finds itself at the mercy of weather conditions. A tantalising sequence showing Béatrice Dalle's character, racing on a dog sled through the snow-covered Jura forest, for example, owes its place at the very end of the film to an unexpected snowfall in Busan during shooting in spring. Originally written to appear at the film's exact centre as an indicator that Trebor is about to leave the North and enter the Southern hemisphere, the mighty Queen of the Northern Hemisphere, as she is called in the credits, was put into place by a flurry of tiny snowflakes in Busan that 'postponed' the film's winter, as Denis puts it, to South Korea (2005). Although the changing weather directly affects the destiny of the film, this small irregularity within the weather pattern does not interfere with the age-old seasonal imaginaries of North and South, as seen in the cut from the balmy climate of the Marquesas Islands and the snowy winter in the Jura in the last scene of *L'Intrus*. But in the swift movement from a Pacific haze to the snow cloaking the Jura woods, climatological imaginations also blend into each other. As Beugnet has pointed out, 'opposed worlds seem to merge as the bluish tree-tops of the Jura wintry forest caught in aerial shots resemble, for a moment, the changing surface of the southern seas' (2008, 45). Moving from the boat gently swaying in the ocean to the jarring movements of a sled hurtling through the forest, the tempo of the film – that had slowed to match Trebor's faltering pace – picks up again, as the camera scrambles to capture the Northern Queen's rapid motions. While Trebor is drifting and the temperature of his ailing body sinks under colourful sheets, Béatrice Dalle's character is racing hot over a blanket of white snow, her short fur jacket gaping open in the brisk air. While the editing renders visible the meteorological connection between the two hemispheres, it also feeds on Western conceptions of the seasons by juxtaposing an image of the South Pacific islands as a place of eternal summer by juxtaposing an image of the Northern valley in the grip of winter's cold. Denis's use of images of winter and summer to construct a coherent spatio-temporal logic for the film reveals that even though her film is governed by unpredictable weather conditions, she ultimately banks on traditional seasonal imaginaries. While the film's ending is inspired by an aberration in local climate, the intersection of time and weather in *L'Intrus* is beholden to planetary rhythms that have since become more and more perturbed. At the same time, however, these imaginaries are challenged, as the Queen of the Northern Hemisphere's zest for life stands in stark contrast to Trebor's demise in the South. His disconnect from both the place where he is at, and the one the film suggests is his home, reveals the deadly risk of this twofold delusion.

The conditions at its various locations thus shape the film's narrative and meaning, just as the circumstances of production shape its form. Aesthetic decisions are not predetermined but owed to monetary circumstances and weather conditions, and the film itself takes on a life of its own (Smith 2005). By engaging debt through different registers, *L'Intrus* shows that the ecological, the economic and the aesthetic cannot be thought in isolation. All the



elements involved in the film and its making are interconnected within complex ecologies of debt. This interplay of ecological, economic and aesthetic factors also permeates the film's exploration of dominant conceptions of the natural. *L'Intrus* interweaves narratives of indebtedness with scenarios of nature – such as the seasonal imaginary Denis employs to evoke images of North and South – that are specifically situated within a neo-colonial context. In what follows, I provide a close reading of these interconnected images of North and South in order to flesh out their significance within global ecologies of debt.

The imaginaries of the South Seas, of course, provide a strong visual and narrative reference for the film, which is in conversation with writings and artworks from generations of Europeans who have undertaken this voyage to the South Seas. The name South Seas itself is a conflation of place and ideation. Denoting a geographic region of the Pacific, the South Seas generally refers to the islands of the Polynesian Triangle, including French Polynesia, the Samoan Islands and Fiji, after it was named Mare del Sur by the Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa, the first European who laid eyes on the area, after crossing the Isthmus of Panama in 1513. Conjuring up a place far away and exotic that is full of bliss and free of obligations, the 'South Seas' also developed into a literary term that designates a genre of writing and film. Conceiving *L'Intrus* through the lens of this genre, Denis is particularly indebted to the work of Robert Louis Stevenson, Paul Gauguin and F. W. Murnau.<sup>3</sup> Her film also incorporates footage from *Le Reflux* by Paul Gégauff, an unfinished film made in 1965 that is itself based on a Stevenson novel and also stars Michel Subor. Through the persona of the young Subor, the fictional text attains a documentary value, becoming a record of Subor's cinematic journey to Tahiti roughly 40 years earlier. This tension between the experience of actual places and the images or descriptions that precede or follow them reverberates throughout the film. Denis herself took time to travel through French Polynesia to find locations for her film, and in a sense *L'Intrus* also traces her own journey, her quest of coming to terms with the idea of the South Seas as a place of beauty, gentleness and charm that at the same time, as she puts it, intimates something 'lethal' (Denis 2015). In order to acknowledge the dark aspect of the colonial experience that seeps through the image, she explains, it is important 'not to be hypnotized by the beauty of those islands ... the attraction of a beautiful landscape is something dangerous for film' (Denis 2005). And yet, when the first image of the South Seas appears halfway through the film, a long, slightly swaying shot of the ocean gives the impression that the camera is hypnotised. The beautiful island is lost in an ocean bathed in colour as the landscape is turned into an abstracted image that foregrounds in a very visceral sense the allure of place that surges through the imaginary of the South Seas.

But things look different when we get on land. The first image of Tahiti is a hillside visually cut in half by a construction crane. Then we are caught in between buses in traffic, watching Trebor being checked out by a truckload of young Polynesian men, an early indication that his son is unlikely to await him with open arms. Indeed, the prospect of seeing his son recedes further in the next shot, as does the image of Trebor himself, who is barely visible behind a reflection of the harbour in the attorney's office window. Anything tropical is kept at bay, framed in the background, like the waterfront that can be glimpsed through the window of Trebor's hotel room. Trebor's most intimate encounter in Papeete takes place in the office of a hardware store, whose owner confirms on a more personal level what the attorney already implied, that his son is not his son anymore and does not wish to see him. When tropical tropes, such as flower garlands, are present it is in a commercial setting, as with the



**Figure 1.** Marquesas Islands (Tartan).

headdress worn by the cashier in the hardware store, whom Trebor insults by overpaying for his purchase. And where we catch a glimpse of joyfulness, we find ourselves left outside behind the fence, next to Trebor, looking in on a private party having a good time. Even after he leaves Tahiti for the Marquesas Islands, images of the landscape arrive slowly, in fleeting shots and at skewed angles (Figure 1). The horizon is kept high, pushing the sea outside of the frame; the expanse of the ocean contracts, and the landscape is not framed to stress its beauty. Trebor's island refuge has fallen apart, so that by the time we get to see more of the island, it is too late. Life on the beach is exchanged for a stay in the hospital, where shots of nurses vaguely reminiscent of Gauguin's Polynesian paintings are displaced by those of an old friend who produces a volunteer to stand in for Trebor's son.

Trebor certainly follows in the steps of earlier European travellers, and he shares their sense of displacement as much as the misconceptions they harboured. But he rarely looks through controlling 'imperial eyes' or displays the omniscient 'travelling gaze' that post-colonial scholars such as Marie Louise Pratt (1992) and David Arnold (2006) have recognised as the prevailing mode of perception in European and North American travel writing. In fact, Trebor constantly averts his eyes. Rather than facing his interlocutor, he turns to old photographs in an evasive gesture. Staring out of windows and doorframes, he seems caught in a past with which he is unable to reconnect. Looking at the ocean, his gaze turns inward, replaying images of the film that brought him to the South Seas in a former life. Instead, Trebor is the one who seems under constant scrutiny. Appraised by business partners, sized up by unknown young men, met by the judging eyes of an acquaintance, scowled at by his former wife, monitored by medical personnel, watched over by a companion and, finally, looked after by a man who is not his son. Those looking at Trebor are also looked at themselves, caught in the viewfinder of cinematographer Agnès Godard, who, in turn, is tasked 'to capture each image to convey a sense that it was generated by his mind' (Smith 2005). And yet, by putting Trebor himself in the crosshairs, the people he meets on his journey also throw back the gaze at the camera and, through the image it creates, at us.

The South Sea part of the film ends with another lingering shot that has the same hypnotic quality as the first shot of the ocean. The image brings to mind Denis's impression of a black island at dusk that appeared to her 'like a tomb with a purple veil' (Denis 2005). The tomb, of course, is Trebor's, whose dream of an idealised son in a tropical paradise finally leaves





**Figure 2.** Island tomb (Tartan).

him adrift on the ocean in a boat in the penultimate sequence of the film. The mesmerising, if daring, sense of apprehension of the earlier shot has succumbed to an inescapable feeling of doom, mobilising the tragic angle required for any colonial travelogue (Figure 2). By contemplating the powerful attraction of beautiful landscapes and the deceiving images they engender, *L'Intrus* reflects on 'our own limitations of vision' (DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan 2015, 15). The two entrancing shots that frame the film's South Sea episode pose the question of how to represent places as ideational spaces while at the same time resisting ideation. Both shots carry traces of the literary and visual tropes of the tropics; both are refracted through the lens of Denis's own experience of colour, landscape and ideas. Culling from mental images as much as actual places, *L'Intrus* carves out a representational space for Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands that both embraces and challenges existing imaginaries of the South Seas.

The 'blissful' island in the South Seas is not only well established and maintained, it has also been subject to critical revision long before Denis arrived on the scene. While Polynesians have embraced the global allure of Tahiti's seductive image, they have also negotiated it through local understandings and representations of place and successfully managed to keep the intrusion of colonial and global powers at bay (D'Hautesserre 2005, 208). At the same time, as Anne-Marie d'Hautesserre has shown, Tahiti's 'world-wide reputation' as a remote tropical paradise has helped conceal its function as a strategic military frontier space (207). By naturalising colonial power relations, the myth of Tahiti turned out to be one of the main resources extracted by France. That is, France's success in keeping covert the extensive use of the Polynesian islands as a nuclear test site is indebted to its image as an untouched, remote paradise.<sup>4</sup> The global circulation of images of Tahiti as a natural paradise thus mediates a neo-colonial relationship in which debt carries an ecological dimension.<sup>5</sup>

While the image of the blissful island in the South produced its own genre of literature and film, the cultural imagination of the little valley in the North is much less concise. *L'Intrus's* critical contribution, I want to suggest, lies less in providing a corrective to the imaginary of the South Seas, than in creating an imaginary for the place in the North from which it emanates. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze's *Desert Islands* (2002), one of the premises Denis conceives for her film is the peculiar trait of Northern people to conjure up island spaces, their capacity to imagine from a location that is regulated and guarded, another that seems borderless

and free (Frodon 2005, 45). For Denis, Gauguin's Tahitian paintings, for instance, do not represent landscapes but ideas. Similarly, her cinematic depiction of the Jura does not represent natural landscapes, but constructs an imaginary of place from ideas and 'mysteries' that permeate this forested mountain terrain. To complement Trebor's island tomb in the South Seas, Denis offers the forest in the Jura as the ribcage around his heart (Omasta 2005, 94). By offsetting well-worn images of the South Seas with evocative images of the Northern mountains, *L'Intrus* balances the representational books, suggesting that the two imaginaries are indebted to each other.

Indeed, the film explicitly introduces the European woodland of the Jura as an imaginary space when it is evoked as part of a sexual fantasy transacted between Trebor's son Sidney, a young father of two, and his wife, Antoinette, who works as a customs officer: 'Concentrez-vous sur ma voix. Vous êtes dans une sapinière. Obscure. Hostile. Votre ceinturon vous pèse. Votre arme se balance sur votre cuisse. Votre gorge est serrée. Vous êtes sur une chasse. Vous êtes mal. C'est pour ça que je suis là.'<sup>16</sup> When, after the sex scene, the camera cuts from the interior space of the apartment to the night-time forest outside, we remain within the same imaginary. We are in a fir forest. It's dark. It is hostile. We seem to be witnessing a hunt. A group of men appear, running through the night, pausing, panting, trying to catch their breath. Carrying bundles and bags, dark-haired, possibly Southern, and male, they fit the imaginary of the 'illegal immigrant' who threatens to intrude upon the Northern economy. From one scene to the next, the private sphere of the apartment has been reconfigured into a geopolitical space. The danger of the forest crosses from erotic play over into political discourse, which, much like Sidney's sexual fantasy, capitalises on fear and embraces securitisation.

There is a similarly structured scene that follows the family on a hike. Again, they are shown 'at home', at home in their bodies, at home in the relationships that exist and form between them, and at home in the landscape around them. However genuine their depiction, the innocence of their sense of belonging is also corrupted in the same scene. Commenting on a group of hikers, Antoinette quips, 'ils n'ont pas les bonnes chaussures!'<sup>17</sup> – her way of saying that they do not belong there, revealing that her idea of belonging entails laying claim on a place. Her perceived entitlement is underlined by a long tracking shot in which the camera watches Antoinette glowering suspiciously at the hikers through a wall of tall grass. Moving back into the space of geopolitics, the following scene revisits the imaginary of the illegal immigrant crossing the forest borderland but now cast in a more sympathetic light, emphasising the desperate aspect of seeking refuge. Antoinette herself appears in a fleeting image towards the end of the scene, now clad in the uniform of her official function as a law-enforcement agent policing the border. The glaring headlights of Trebor's car, though, thwart her controlling gaze. As in the first scene that explores how fear figures in personal and political narratives of the forest, this scene recalibrates imaginaries of belonging through a series of experiences that traverse personal and political spaces.

But soon the geopolitical dimension retreats again, for the forest not only harbours animosity but also provides shelter. A young woman who dwells in a cage (named 'la sauvageonne', the wild child or wild girl) is shown bathing in a spring with her dog, turning our attention to the natural environment. Trebor, too, is introduced as a creature of the woods. This often-analysed scene shows him lying undressed in a forest clearing, leaning against a tree in a bed of ferns with his two huskies, his movement and breathing blending with the soundscape of the forest (Figure 3). The scene seems to suggest his closeness to nature, a



**Figure 3.** Bed of ferns (Tartan).



**Figure 4.** Jura pasture (Tartan).

sentiment well captured by Martine Beugnet, who writes that ‘Trebor appears to exist in sensual harmony with the elements, his body almost merging with its surroundings’ (2008, 41). Referring to modern environmentalism in the US, Ursula K. Heise has connected this image to the rhetoric of place and localism that permeates much early nature writing and anchored it specifically in gendered discourse: ‘[W]hite male environmentalist writers often put emphasis on the (usually male) individual’s encounter with and physical immersion in the landscape, typically envisioned as wild rather than rural or urban’ (2008, 29). Although the scene closely follows this environmentalist script, Trebor has to share the forest with the wild girl, who claims her space within this traditionally masculine imaginary. Furthermore, by placing Trebor right next to a tree that has been felled, the framing of the shot also questions the very image of the wild, natural environment it so carefully constructs, calling attention to the human impact on the environment instead.

For, despite its rough beauty, the many forest-rimmed open pastures also lend the Jura a park-like appearance. Shaped through centuries of human habitation, the images of the Jura we see throughout the first hour of the film show a landscape cultivated through traditional land use practices, crop and animal husbandry as well as artificial and natural

reforestation (Sjögren 2006) (Figure 4). Similarly to the mountains Trebor conquers on his bike, the forests he traverses have been tamed by human labour. To a certain extent, his long ride across mountain roads anticipates an imaginary accented fairly recently by ecological tourism, which promotes the region as a 'mountain biker's paradise', inviting patrons to discover, as one travel agency puts it, 'the mysterious unknown world of the Jura'.<sup>8</sup> The environmental and ecological imaginaries of the Jura evoked by *L'Intrus* fulfil a similar ideological function as the image of the tropical paradise. Historically, the forest has been an extremely contested space in France owing to the important role it played as a natural resource for both local and national economies. Within this conflict, the communal land use rights of the rural population were at odds with aristocratic and national interests eager to preserve pristine hunting grounds or extract the timber needed for maritime expansion.<sup>9</sup> Strictly enforced forest legislation not only banned long-standing practices such as gathering branches or cutting firewood but also constructed them as a threat to national security.<sup>10</sup> Casting the Jura as the European wild thus veils the interconnection of economic interests and ecological exploitation that disregard the needs of local communities and that have shaped the landscape in the first place.

Maybe something of the violence that regularly erupted between peasants and armed forest guards reverberates in the devastating encounter between the wild girl, who fashions herself a wreath from gathered branches, and a troop of hunters, who seem to be patrolling the forest rather than searching for game. The girl has just taken a bath by the fire, finding refuge from the snow in Trebor's abandoned cabin. The next morning is grey and cold. A body wrapped and carried in a bloody sheet suddenly fills the frame, a lifeless arm protruding from the folds. Two hunters discard the body in a field of snow; the wild girl is dead. The view turns towards the ground, moving across the field. But instead of arriving at the girl's body, our gaze abruptly lands on a heart screaming red against the white snow. While the ensuing shot shows Trebor awakening from sleep in a hotel room, the image of the dismembered organ has already situated the sequence within the nightmare that is Trebor's heart transplant. However, for all we know, the girl and the hunters have no part in the dealings that secure his possession of a new heart. What connects them, what they share, is the forest where they live, and which they guard, or have left behind. Both the wild girl and the hunters exist as part of the imaginary of the Jura forest long before they come to haunt Trebor's dreams. Again, there is a trafficking of images that move within the complex network of exchanges, both economic and ecological. While *L'Intrus* does not embrace the idea of the Jura as a natural landscape, the Jura, as a place, is connoted with the idea of 'home' – a home, as it were, that requires protection and saving. This brings to mind Cohen's notion of the fraught logic of the 'double *oikos*' as home (2012, 15), reminding us that in view of the current environmental crisis ecological systems are fragile and, just like economic ones, threaten to default.

*L'Intrus's* contribution to ecological thought, McMahon (2014) suggests, lies in bringing forth a non-anthropocentric imaginary and in decentering the human by rescaling our vision. For Gustafsson, landscape in Denis's films functions as an interface that 'oscillates between a vision materialized and a vision withheld' (2014, 205). By simultaneously drawing us in yet refusing to be appropriated, landscape thus 'enables another viewing position' (212). More specifically, as Galt has pointed out, the film 'renders visible globalisation's circuits of exploitation' (2015, 275). However, *L'Intrus* is also acutely concerned with Trebor's vision of place, and the European perspective it represents. What makes the film stand out as a significant

ecological text, for me, is not so much that it offers a new, non-anthropocentric imaginary or allows for another viewing position, but that it makes legible a particular way of seeing the environment. The environmental and ecological imaginaries of place we see through Trebor's eyes bring into vision modern conceptions of nature. Ideations of nature, that is, that affect attitudes as much as actions, thus taking their toll on the environment.

Framed within this field of vision, the film offers a cinematic territory, to borrow Denis's term, in which ideations of nature mediate scenarios of debt. Mountain idyll and tropical paradise are equally revealed as ideations; both Jura forest and Polynesian islands are cultural landscapes shaped by centuries of land management and domination, each of which represent on-going political practices that subjugate land and people alike. Narratives of indebtedness are inscribed into the landscape; 'nature' is revealed to be a construct governed by relationships of debt. Moreover, *L'Intrus's* complementary depiction of imaginaries of the South Sea islands and the Northern mountain forest suggests that the imagined relationship to a place that is unknown and far away is dependent upon an imagined relationship to the natural environment that is familiar and close by. For if we view these interconnected, debt-ridden imaginaries of place within the context of the film's inquiry into circuits of globalisation, they may also tell us something about the economic and ecological relationship between the Global North and the Global South.

Debt is directly addressed twice in *L'Intrus*. In both cases Trebor is told that he owes something and that his debt remains unpaid, either because his gift has been turned down, as with his Polynesian son, or because his payment is deemed insufficient, as is made unmistakably clear to him in a dream sequence with the mysterious Russian woman who had brokered his heart transplant and relentlessly trails Trebor around the globe. For Galt, Trebor's repeated failure to cash in on his neo-colonial desire and redeem his patriarchal inheritance demonstrates 'the film's refusal' to underwrite such narratives; instead, 'that inheritance is foreclosed on' (2014, 104–105). In view of the film's extensive engagement with global economic circuits, McMahon reads Trebor's insolvency 'as a sign of an impossible debt that the West can never repay' (2014, 11). However, *L'Intrus's* careful attention to various practices of claiming and exploiting land in conjunction with its movement spanning the two sides of the globe also allows us to reflect on the question of ecological debt, which refers to the uneven global distribution of economic gains and ecological losses, and, more specifically, the accrued environmental liabilities that Northern countries owe to the Global South (Canavan, Klarr, and Vu 2010). *L'Intrus* suggests that these intertwined relationships of economic and ecological debt also play out on the level of representation. In other words, the debt of images between North and South mediates the actual relations of economic and ecological debt. This plays out not only in images of the South Seas but also metaphorically 'at home' in images of the Jura.

In his response to *L'Intrus*, Jean-Luc Nancy connected the film's radical questioning of naturalness to the current ecological crisis. For Nancy, moments in the film, 'for example [...] a long static shot of dawn rising over the violet sea of the islands', pose questions about 'the nature of nature [...] for us today and the possibility or impossibility of continuing to inhabit the earth' (2005, 148). *L'Intrus* was made in 2004; Nancy wrote his response in 2005. Ten years later the danger of rising sea levels – caused predominantly by Northern societies – that threaten South Pacific island communities has been widely acknowledged. The growing ecological crisis adds urgency to *L'Intrus's* charged images of debt-ridden nature; however, just like nature, the environmental crisis is not something external, 'over there', but lies within



ideas of place and self. By insisting that ways of seeing the environment are culturally and historically situated, *L'Intrus* suggests that attending to the ecological challenges of the present moment begins with understanding the imaginaries of place and environment at home.

## Notes

1. The volume *Telemorphosis* came out of a series of symposia organised by the Institute for Critical Climate Change, co-founded by Tom Cohen and Henry Sussman. Bruno Latour can be named as another critic of critique who has famously aligned this position with ecological concerns (2004b). For an excellent exposition on the re-evaluation of notions of critique within the context of contemporary ecological debates, see Canavan, Klarr, and Vu (2010).
2. Denis explains: 'Then everyone is aware – the crew, the actors – that there is a gap, so they don't expect, "Well, in the next scene, I will explain more about myself". They know there won't be any explanations, so they act differently' (Smith 2005).
3. See, for instance, the travel writings of Robert Louis Stevenson ([1900] 1971), Paul Gauguin's Polynesian paintings as well as his book *Noa Noa* ([1901] 1976), a fictional account of his life in Tahiti, and F. W. Murnau's *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931), a film combining documentary and fiction that Murnau co-wrote and produced with Robert J. Flaherty.
4. Classified until 2013, the extent of the nuclear test's destructive environmental impact on Polynesian ancestral land and people has only recently been uncovered and publicised (Anon. 2013).
5. The fraught relationship between idealised landscapes and the colonial exploitation of human and natural resources is also central in Denis's film *White Material* (2009). Similarly, the lavishing shots of the Djibouti desert in *Beau Travail* pose questions about the imagistic appropriation of colonial landscapes.
6. 'Concentrate on my voice. You are in a fir forest. It's dark. It's hostile. Your belt feels heavy. Your gun rides up on your hip. Your throat is tight. You are on a hunt. You are not well. This is why I'm here.'
7. 'They're wearing the wrong shoes!'
8. See for instance [http://www.magicswitzerland.com/tours/jura\\_bike.htm](http://www.magicswitzerland.com/tours/jura_bike.htm) (accessed April 14, 2017).
9. Although incidental here, it is striking that French forests, including the Jura, literally provided the material base for colonial expansion in the South Pacific that eventually brought about the imaginaries of the South Seas.
10. For a history of the conflicts between aristocrats, landowners and peasantry about industrial versus communal land uses of the French forests, see Matteson (2013, 2015).

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## Filmography

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*Beau Travail*, 1999, Claire Denis, France.  
*L'Intrus*, 2004, Claire Denis, France.  
*Les Salauds*, 2013, Claire Denis, France.  
*Tabu: A Story of the South Seas*, 1931, F. W. Murnau, United States.  
*White Material*, 2009, Claire Denis, France/Cameroon.

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