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# Incest, affect and ambiguous politics in two films by Claire Denis

KATIE PLEMING

Father–daughter relations are a persistent presence in the filmmaking of Claire Denis. From *Protée* and *France* in *Chocolat* (1988) to *Monte and Willow* in *High Life* (2018), Denis has constantly returned to and re-addressed the bond between young girls and their father figures across her filmmaking career. At the same time, as Emma Wilson has suggested, ‘[a] hypersensitivity to incest is endemic to [Denis’s] bleak and ecstatic vision of humanity. It is simply there: subtly yet pointedly invoked, a shadow presence.’<sup>1</sup> This attentiveness to incest may be viewed in the context of Denis’s interest in extreme and violent dimensions of the erotic, as in *Trouble Every Day* (2001), and in tacit desires that are ultimately unrealized, as in *Beau Travail* (1999) or *Chocolat*. Yet the accentuation of the erotic contours of familial relationships may be considered as a distinct – and uniquely unsettling – tendency in her work. The crossover between this interest in fathers and daughters and this sensitivity to incest is most overtly staged in *Les Salauds/Bastards* (2013), a film whose final scene involves a sexual act between a father and daughter. Yet while incest finds explicit form in *Bastards*, its ‘shadow presence’ can be observed in other films. In this essay I examine two films in which Denis represents the possibility of incest in this way: *35 rhums/35 Shots of Rum* (2008) and *High Life*.<sup>2</sup> Focusing first on the ambiguous mise-en-scene of father–daughter interactions, and subsequently on the affective impact of this framing, I explore the ethical and political contours of Denis’s strategic destabilizing of certainty in her representation of father–daughter relationships.

1 Emma Wilson, ‘Love me tender: new films from Claire Denis’, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 4 (2019), p. 20.

2 Emma Wilson compares the relationship between Monte and Willow in *High Life* to the bond shared by Lionel and Joséphine in *35 Shots of Rum*. *Ibid.*

Recent work on the political possibilities of negative affect informs my understanding of this ambiguity and ambivalence as a political strategy. I draw on Nikolaj Lübecker's theorization of the 'feel-bad film', which considers the functions of negative affect in cinema (including works by Denis), and highlights the specificity of film as a medium through which to both elicit and refuse strong, unequivocal emotions, and the political implications of this. I also draw on Sianne Ngai's concept of 'ugly feelings', which allows us to view Denis's ambiguous framing of fathers and daughters, and the discomfort which that produces, as a political strategy, one which highlights and brings to representation the frustrated agency, feelings of exploitation, and other negative affects associated with contemporary subjecthood.

Both films discussed here position the intense and unusually close bond between father and daughter in opposition to the political contexts they inhabit. These contexts differ radically: much of the action of *35 Shots of Rum* takes place in and around a block of flats on the margins of Paris, while *High Life* is set in a prison spaceship suspended in the horrifying void of space. The films are also formally different: *35 Shots of Rum*, perhaps Denis's most understated work in terms of rhythm, tone and form, stands in stark contrast to *High Life*'s dizzying, non-linear narrative and overtly violent themes and imagery.<sup>3</sup> Yet in spite of their apparently divergent aesthetic and narrative concerns, both films are centred on a close and isolated father–daughter relationship. Denis signals this closeness through the use of gently glowing interiors, and an intimate focus on small gestures of care. Beyond this, both films consider politics in terms of marginalization, domination and exploitation.

*35 Shots of Rum* follows Lionel (Alex Descas), a Paris train driver, and his daughter Joséphine (Mati Diop), a university student. The pair live alone together – cooking, touching, talking, watching one another. These domestic rhythms of care are warmly lit: sequences shot from outside the building offer glimpses in through the window, further highlighting the intimacy and cosiness of the space within. Space outside the apartment is significant too, as Lionel's work and Joséphine's studies offer political grounding to the film. Rosalind Galt argues that Denis's cinema 'brings into vision the state, corporate, and criminal locations of contemporary globality' and 'thus renders visible [...] systems of neo-colonial exploitation'.<sup>4</sup> In *35 Shots of Rum*, Denis foregrounds questions of race both in the immediate context of the narrative and in a global perspective, marking out implicit connections between forms of oppression and exploitation. The film offers a pointed articulation of its political stakes in a scene set in one of Joséphine's university seminars, where Joséphine argues that developing-world debt is an instrument of domination used by creditor countries to impose their own rules on the Global South. One student asks whether it is possible to believe in the power of the weak (*la puissance des faibles*), of if there is no hope at all. Joséphine responds that these issues

3 *35 Shots of Rum* consciously echoes Ozu's *Banshun/Late Spring* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1949) – a connection explored by James S. Williams in 'Romancing the father in Claire Denis's *35 rhums*', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 2 (2009), pp. 44–50.

4 Rosalind Galt, 'Claire Denis and the world cinema of refusal', *SubStance*, vol. 43, no. 1, French Cinema and the Crises of Globalization (2014), p. 104.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

6 Darren Hughes, 'Dancing reveals so much: an interview with Claire Denis', *Senses of Cinema*, no. 50 (2009), <<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2009/conversations-on-film/claire-denis-interview/>> accessed 22 June 2022; qtd in Galt, 'Claire Denis and the world cinema of refusal', p. 102.

7 Galt, 'Claire Denis and the world cinema of refusal', p. 102.

8 Hughes, 'Dancing reveals so much'.

9 Galt, 'Claire Denis and the world cinema of refusal', p. 102. This extended temporality also spills over into leisure time. As we witness long and tiring commuter-train journeys undertaken by Lionel and Joséphine, the film subtly attends to geographical and socio-economic divisions between margin and centre in Paris.

10 José Sarmiento, 'Electra revisited: on Claire Denis' 35 rhums', *Senses of Cinema*, no. 63 (2012), <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/cteq/electra-revisited-on-claire-denis-35-rhums/>> accessed 22 June 2022.

should be discussed without getting emotional (*sans rentrer dans l'affectif*). Another student disagrees, and also asks why these countries do not demand reparations for slavery; a third argues that it is the system that must change. Galt writes that by opposing 'Reason versus emotion', the scene invites us to wonder whether 'the film [is] a reasoned critique, or an articulation of affect', as 'Denis ponders the shapes and feelings of political engagement with the world'.<sup>5</sup> As I will argue, affect is a primary means by which Denis elaborates a critique of political systems; yet this affect (oblique, abstract and challenging) does not take the form we might expect.

Galt suggests that the university scene represents a deliberate and direct 'marking' of the film's political stakes. This moment explicitly communicates that which remains unspoken (or implicit) elsewhere in the film: the problem of structural racism. If *35 Shots of Rum* 'renders visible [...] systems of neo-colonial exploitation', this is most clearly articulated via the question of work, in particular through a focus on Lionel's job and his colleagues, who are all Black. As Galt notes, in making *35 Shots of Rum*, Denis states that she wished to avoid stereotypical narratives of Black subjects in France as disenfranchised outsiders (or 'clandestines'): 'they have real lives, they are settled, they are French'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Galt argues, the film does not 'treat race in terms of [...] discrimination or immigration' (unlike films such as *S'en fout la mort/No Fear, No Die* [1990] or *J'ai pas sommeil/I Can't Sleep* [1994]).<sup>7</sup> At the same time, when Denis describes the construction of the narrative, she also states that 'the real thing is that there is a community that is French and also has black skin, that is integrated but also rejected'.<sup>8</sup> Thus while the Black subjects of *35 Shots of Rum* are not presented as 'clandestines', in its focus on a Black, working-class community the film is subtly attentive to forms of social exclusion and oppression, in particular via its focus on the rhythms of labour. Extended tracking sequences shot from inside the cab of the train foreground the driver's point of view, highlighting 'the monotonous temporality of driving'.<sup>9</sup> Work is also emphasized in the suicide of René, Lionel's friend and ex-colleague. As José Sarmiento observes, René's death echoes Galoup's (possible) suicide in *Beau Travail*: 'While Galoup falls back on the gun that defined his career, René returns to the same train that was part of his work'.<sup>10</sup> While at work himself, Lionel discovers René's body lying on the train tracks that serve in the film as a figure for the inexorable rhythms of neoliberal society. These associations are marked out in the film's opening title sequence, a point-of-view shot from inside the cab of a train that René is driving. This offers a close focus on the tracks, where we encounter a group of men at work in construction gear. The relationship between labour and death is implicitly raised by this image of the men on the tracks (which anticipates the discovery of René's body later in the film). In contrast, the distant abstraction of capital hovers in the background, figured via the skyscrapers of the Parisian business district of La Défense, briefly visible on the horizon. This opening

sequence thus signals the socio-economic and spatial divisions that undergird conditions of inequality and marginalization in Paris.

At the same time, René's death highlights the unavailability of forms of care and sociality to those who are no longer employable. His death appears to illustrate the failure of social structures, or the 'care gap', to use Nancy Fraser's term, which emerges from the devaluation of care and the obligations of labour.<sup>11</sup> Outside the social relationships he forms through work, René is alone. In the absence of social support, retirement exposes him to loneliness and he ultimately chooses to die. Yet René's exposure also figures a broader context of race- and class-based precarity. For Lionel, familial bonds mitigate the hostilities of daily life. Yet, as I will suggest below, by embedding care in the ambiguous father-daughter relationship, Denis complicates our understanding of the domestic as a site that exceeds the transactional and exploitative logics of neoliberalism.

Vectors of power, domination and exclusion are subtly traced in the central narrative of *35 Shots of Rum*, but in *High Life* politics is starkly staged in terms of domination, exposure and bodily violation.<sup>12</sup> Monte (Robert Pattinson) is an inmate on a spaceship that is part prison, part experimental reproductive laboratory. Dr Dibs (Juliette Binoche) forcibly inseminates Boyse (Mia Goth) using Monte's sperm, and a baby is born. Boyse commits suicide and Dr Dibs soon follows suit. Monte finds himself alone on the ship with his daughter Willow, and we observe their bond in her infancy, and then in her early adolescence.

Denis has explicitly articulated the influence of biopolitical theory on the design of the spaceship, stating in an interview: 'I've been reading Foucault, and he says that with history, the shape of prisons change as the psychology changes. The shape I chose has to do with how a jail looks today.'<sup>13</sup> Yet she departs from a realist prison design, her use of low, warm lighting and fleshy tones producing a distinctively corporeal sci-fi visuality. The foregrounding of the laboratory and medical technology as mediators of human life (and death) highlights the materiality of the lived body (and its exploitation). As Hannah Paveck suggests, 'For a science fiction film set in space, with a decidedly clinical focus [...] there is a palpable sense of dirt and decay', as 'fluids [...] blood, cum, milk)' seep and flow.<sup>14</sup> Through its leaky porosity, the ship itself becomes an extension of the oozing, tactile surface of the human body. When the ship takes on qualities of embodiment, it is as if the film's configuration of space as inflected by the biopolitical spills over so that the ship visually imitates the vulnerability and exposure of the body in that space.

The emphasis on biology in the film serves to draw attention to the ways in which bodies that are bleakly exposed to structures of power become reduced to their biological functions. Through the emphasis on reproduction, the prisoners are vulnerable and exposed, their rights suspended. Thus when Dibs rapes Monte in his sleep, harvesting his sperm in order to forcibly inseminate Boyse, their rights and bodily

11 Nancy Fraser, 'Contradictions of capital and care', *New Left Review*, no. 100 (2016), p. 114.

12 While the central characters in *High Life* are white, Denis's attentiveness to the marginalization of Black subjects in *35 Shots of Rum* is retained residually here. Thus *High Life* bears witness to the literal difference in the exposure to death of Black and white subjects: Elektra, a Black woman (whose name gestures to the incestuous concerns of the film) is the first victim of Dibs's reproductive experiments; upon her death, a second Black character, Tcherny (a Russian nickname he picked up in prison – which translates as 'black') remarks that 'even in space, the Black ones are the first to die'.

13 Natalia Winkelman, 'High Life director Claire Denis on designing a "pro-sex" space prison', *Slate*, 5 April 2019 <<https://slate.com/culture/2019/04/high-life-claire-denis-director-interview-sex-space.html>> accessed 22 June 2022.

14 Hannah Paveck, 'No other voice: Claire Denis's "High Life"', *Another Gaze*, 27 May 2019, <<https://www.anothergaze.com/no-voice-claire-denis-high-life-feminism/>> accessed 22 June 2022.

15 Agamben writes that 'When life and politics – originally divided, and linked together by the no-man's land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life – begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception'. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 148.

16 Wilson, 'Love me tender', pp. 19–20.

agency are negated through their status as prisoners. The rape is a means of bypassing Monte's refusal to exchange a sperm donation for drugs, highlighting the ease with which agency is overturned. Denis's prison-laboratory-spaceship is a site in which, in Giorgio Agamben's terms, all life becomes bare, animal life, purely biological life devoid of rights.<sup>15</sup> Soon after the assault on Monte and Boyse, Denis gives form to the psychological and phenomenological experience of bare life. We witness a close-up shot of skin, fabric and white liquid; the liquid drips down the flesh, milk pooling on the hem of the fabric. The shot is richly textured, both visually and sonically: we see little clots of milk that catch on the grain of the bare skin and the fabric; we hear shallow, ragged breathing. The image cuts briefly to a close-up of Boyse's face, looking down, then to a reverse-shot from her perspective. Her hand is in focus as it moves slowly over her milk-soaked torso, her fingers webbing out as if in tentative exploration of the white fluid that covers her skin like a film. The image is haptic, evoking the sense of touch, yet this intimate visuality serves to highlight Boyse's exposure, isolation and abjection: in this regime touch is violent, or conveys mute horror.

Once Dibs's regime has collapsed, leaving Willow and Monte alone, the new community is inaugurated visually through images of a different kind of tactility between father and baby daughter. These tender images, foregrounding touch as a form of care, are striking for their dissonance with the disciplinary regime's violence of touch. The gentle intimacy of the images – marked by skin-to-skin contact and images of Willow's plump, grabbing hands – stands in contrast to the bleak clinical regime that governs Willow's conception, and the abject aftermath of her birth. For Wilson, 'Early scenes [of *High Life*] are a lullaby, long and protracted'; 'It is as if they are dreams of caring perfectly'.<sup>16</sup> Thus we are given close-up shots of Willow's soft, rounded body as Monte tends to her, father and daughter bathed in pink and yellow light; like the warm, domestic scenes in *35 Shots of Rum*, the images bespeak devotion and care. That no such tactile, loving interaction is possible while the spaceship is governed by Dibs is emphasized by the shot of a new-born Willow that follows the post-natal images of Boyse. We see baby Willow through the walls of an incubator, looking totally abandoned: the medical apparatus in the shot stands in for any human form of care; her connection to Boyse is denoted only by the residue of clotted milk that runs down her chin.

In both films Denis thus establishes an oppressive political context in which certain bodies and lives are rejected or exploited, exposed or abandoned. Dialectically opposed to these contexts, the father–daughter relationship is a site of tender devotion in a hostile world. Yet although both films offer up scenes of parental intimacy, it is positioned ambiguously, and care is at times eclipsed by the threat of incestuous desire. As such, although in both films the father–daughter bond is established as a counterpoint to violent political structures, it is a bond haunted by the threat of violence, as the films gesture towards the extreme and marginal erotic contours of the familial relationship.

- 17 "When my grand-father's wife died", [Denis] says, "my mother was two months old, and he decided – he was a very good-looking man – but he decided to save himself for the baby, so he never wanted to have another [woman], because he thought that would be a betrayal". And did they have a close relationship? "Close relationship?" she says. "They were madly in love". Kira Cochrane, 'Interview: I'm not interested in making conclusions', *The Guardian*, 3 July 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jul/03/claire-denis-french-director-interview>> accessed 22 June 2022.
- 18 'Entretien avec Claire Denis Autour de *35 Shots of Rum*', *Unifrance* press dossier, <<https://medias.unifrance.org/medias/141/144/37005/presse/35-Shots-of-Rum-dossier-de-presse-francais.pdf>> accessed 22 June 2022 (my translation).
- 19 Catherine Wheatley, 'La Famille Denis', in Marjorie Vecchio (ed.), *The Films of Claire Denis: Intimacy on the Border* London: IB Tauris, 2014), p. 71.
- 20 Andrew Asibong notes this ambiguity, writing that 'possibilities for a dangerous or abusive rapport with space and the others within that space exist in this film', since 'Denis cannot refrain from hinting at the risk of incest [...] as the spectator remains briefly uncertain as to the precise nature of the relationship between Lionel and Jo.' Yet in contrast to my argument here, Asibong suggests that the film resolves this ambiguity via a more normative narrative: 'instead of forcing these situations to lead the various protagonists towards inevitable fragmentation and/or mutual devouring, Denis allows them a positive potentiality [...] Lionel and Jo give each other enough space – literally – to form sexual and emotional bonds with other people.' Asibong, 'Claire Denis's flickering spaces of hospitality', in *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2011), p. 163.
- 21 'Entretien avec Claire Denis', *Unifrance* press dossier, p. 6 (my translation).

In *35 Shots of Rum*, the close, tactile father–daughter bond often seems to exceed the bounds of a normative father–daughter relationship, opening up the possibility of desire. Denis has cited the relationship between her mother and her widowed grandfather, one she describes in quasi-erotic terms, as an inspiration for the film.<sup>17</sup> The age difference between Diop and Descas is narrow enough to introduce ambiguity to the opening scenes of the film – an ambiguity which Denis cites as a deliberate factor in her direction.

They are a believable couple, at first glance. So much so that Jean-Pol [Fargeau, co-scriptwriter] and I wrote the first scene in the apartment as if it were about a couple who are meeting up after a day's work. Except at the last moment [...] they separate, they don't sleep in the same room.<sup>18</sup>

As Catherine Wheatley suggests, 'Such is the closeness between Lionel and Jo [...] that they could easily be mistaken for lovers during the film's opening scenes, as they perform a delicate *pas-de-deux* around their kitchen'.<sup>19</sup> This ambiguity is apparent, for example, in the gesture with which Joséphine first greets Lionel on-screen: rather than offering the socially neutral double *bises*, she plants a single lingering kiss on his cheek.<sup>20</sup> The sound of the kiss is amplified, as if to ensure the spectator does not miss its subtle intensity. In the interview cited above, Denis redoubles the emphasis on the erotic potential that undergirds the relationship: 'being the daughter of that man would mean having absolute confidence in him while at the same time being aware of his fragilities, but also seeing him as a seductive man'.<sup>21</sup> Yet their relationship is never explicitly framed as incestuous; these suggestions and ambiguities simply make up the film's subtextual fabric, subtly marking each interaction between Joséphine and Lionel.

At certain points the tactile closeness between Lionel and Joséphine on-screen threatens to overflow into the erotic, yet knowledge of the extent of their devotion is ultimately withheld. Thus, while the film does not make any sexual element explicit, it is marked by an ambiguity that makes the reading of incest available – in Wilson's terms, the 'shadow presence' of incest. The film defers the moment in which their relationship as father and daughter is made explicit: we are halfway through before we first hear Joséphine call Lionel 'Papa'. If the film plays, initially, on this indiscernibility, the moment in which their familial relationship is voiced is one that itself intensifies the ambiguous nature of their bond. Joséphine gives Lionel an effervescent painkiller to ease his hangover; she sits on a chair and watches him drink it while he lies in bed, vulnerable, his feet bare (figure 1). Her gestures are patient, almost maternal, while his splayed position and hangover suggest adolescence, such that, even in this moment of clarification, the mise-en-scene seems to suggest a subversion of the father–daughter relationship that the dialogue is about to evoke. As Wheatley suggests, the couple's 'exclusive rituals have quasi-erotic undertones, which bubble to the

Fig. 1. Lionel (Alex Descas) and his daughter Joséphine (Mati Diop), in *35 rhums/35 Shots of Rum* (Claire Denis, 2008)



<sup>22</sup> Wheatley, 'La Famille Denis', p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

surface' in this scene.<sup>22</sup> Unpacking its subtle eroticism, Wheatley highlights Joséphine's pose (writing that 'she curls herself submissively'), and Lionel's clothing ('soft jersey garments that cling suggestively to his powerful frame').<sup>23</sup> As the scene progresses, Lionel asks Joséphine to come closer; she kneels by the bed, her head on Lionel's pillow. The camera remains static throughout, deferring a cut to close-up so that we witness the contours of their intimacy from a distance. We observe their increasingly tactile interaction, as they clasp hands, beginning to caress one another's forearms. When the close-up finally comes, it is timed to synchronize exactly with the word 'Papa': the moment enacts a destabilizing of the look that coincides with the startling clarity of the utterance. The image then cuts to a further close-up of Joséphine and Lionel's hands: Lionel rubs and caresses her hand with his thumb, before touching her middle and ring fingers in turn. Then, he gazes intensely into her eyes, and tells her to 'feel free' (*sens-toi libre*). The elliptical phrase is deliberately ambiguous: it could be understood as an exchange between lovers, in particular since *libre* bears a secondary meaning of sexual freedom in French. Joséphine withdraws, as if to reject this liberation from the closeness and exclusivity of their bond (or perhaps drawing back from the intensity of the touch). The film insists on ambiguity and possibility here, both through the dialogue and visually. Yet subtext is never brought to visual (or even explicit verbal) representation; rather, incestuous desire hovers, remaining on the threshold of representation.

There is one brief sequence, however, in which the full force of this desire might be read as approaching representation. In the film's one departure from the codes of realism, we see Lionel and Joséphine riding a horse together over the tracks usually occupied by the train. The sequence is set up as Lionel's fantasy. It begins with Lionel and René in the cab of a train; Lionel counsels René, saying, 'when I have dark thoughts, I think about my daughter'. The train enters a tunnel and as it



exits into the light, we are given a close-up of Lionel's face. There is a cut to an image of hooves crossing the tracks, followed by shots of Lionel and Joséphine riding a horse, their bodies pressed together, moving rhythmically. The camera pans down slightly to frame Lionel's hand, fisted just above Joséphine's thigh, before panning up to give us the faces of father and daughter, both focused and looking intently forward; Joséphine's mouth is slightly open. The sequence ruptures the diegesis, offering up a dynamic sublimation of the generalized tension – sexual, but also sociopolitical – which overshadows the film. Yet it remains in the realm of fantasy: unassimilated to the narrative, the status of the sequence, like the nature of Lionel and Joséphine's relationship, remains enigmatic and obscure. Galt suggests that these images of father and daughter on a horse 'bespeak a queer political imaginary, a fantasmatic space of escape from the tracks and circuits of the neoliberal sensorium'.<sup>24</sup> Here, as elsewhere in the films of Denis, the political and the erotic are indivisible. What Galt terms a making-visible of a 'fantasy of escape from the everyday and of experience outside the strictures of the social'<sup>25</sup> can thus also be read as a visual staging of the desire between Lionel and Joséphine: a desire which exists 'outside the strictures of the social', and beyond the realm of realist representation.<sup>26</sup>

As Wilson has suggested, the father–daughter relationship in *35 Shots of Rum* is marked by 'cowed respect, and tenderness'; for Wilson it anticipates the relationship between Monte and Willow in *High Life*.<sup>27</sup> As with her commentary on Lionel and Joséphine in *35 Shots of Rum*, Denis does not shy away from the possibility encoded in Monte and Willow's relationship in *High Life* when speaking about the film. She suggests in an interview that the film poses an implicit question: 'If he has his baby girl with him, does it mean they will start a new humanity, breaking a taboo and eventually being man and wife?'.<sup>28</sup> The film reminds us, when Monte feeds Willow vegetables grown using their own bodily waste as fertiliser, that life on the ship necessitates a break with terrestrial norms – 'can you say "taboo"?' he coos. Later on in the film, sexual taboo is figured visually when a now-teenage Willow leaves a bloodstain in Monte's bed. This scene follows a jarring narrative ellipsis that sees Willow jump from babyhood to puberty, and begins with a close-up on Monte's face, his eyes shut. There is a cut to a close-up shot of a hand caressing and tousling dark curly hair, gripping it in a fist, followed by a cut back to Monte's face, his eyes slowly opening, as if he is waking up. There is a final cut back to the hair, the hand moving more tentatively now. Next we see Monte and Willow, now a young teenager, in bed together, his hand in her dark curly hair (figure 2). He raises his head abruptly and looks at her, grunts, jostles her awake, and roughly pushes her out of the bed. He looks down and sees blood on his sheets. Like the bedroom scene in *35 Shots of Rum* discussed above, this scene turns on ambiguity. From the opening moments of the sequence, in the move from the forceful gripping of hair to a gentler caress, Denis troubles our understanding of what we are witnessing, by evoking and then

24 Galt, 'Claire Denis and the world cinema of refusal', p. 108.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

26 The recourse to fantasy in evoking desire as unmanageable recalls Denis's 'vampire' film, *Trouble Every Day* – a reference which is intensified by the presence of Descas in both films. In *Trouble Every Day*, however, Descas plays a scientist fighting to keep his lover's intolerably excessive desire in check.

27 Wilson, 'Love me tender', p. 20.

28 Bilge Ebir, 'Claire Denis made a movie about space, but she swears it's not sci-fi', *Vulture*, 8 April 2019, <<https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/claire-denis-high-life-interview.html>> accessed 21 June 2022. In other interviews Denis has repeatedly and provocatively called Willow a *femme fatale* – for example in Jeremy Piette, 'Claire Denis: "Le film m'a permis d'imaginer la fin de l'humanité comme le devenir d'autre chose"', *Libération*, 6 November 2018.

**Fig. 2. Monte (Robert Pattinson) and Willow (Jessie Ross), in *High Life* (Claire Denis, 2018).**



**29** Such an act could be viewed as a traumatic repetition of the semen extraction scene, where the sleeping Monte's bodily functions override his conscious intent.

**30** Ehiri, 'Claire Denis made a movie about space'.

withdrawing the suggestion of passionate touch. The opening images of a hand caressing and forcefully gripping hair might be understood as a memory or dream (and we might initially assume that the hair belongs to Dibs, who also has dark curly hair, since the scene immediately follows one in which Monte watches Dibs with baby Willow). Yet in the cut to the image of Monte's hand in Willow's hair, the moment also becomes legible as a partial representation of (unconscious?) incestuous transgression.<sup>29</sup> Denis refuses to resolve these ambiguities, and the status of the sequence of sensual touch remains unstable.

The bloodstain, meanwhile, grounds the twin possibilities of incest and violence in the spectator's mind. As noted above, Denis suggests that Willow's presence poses an implicit question: 'does it mean they will start a new humanity, breaking a taboo and eventually being man and wife?'<sup>30</sup> In this scene Denis figures the question economically, via the cut from one temporality to another; the possibility of incest is ushered in via the image of the now-teenage Willow and Monte in bed together. At the same time, the power imbalances and possibilities for violation which inhere in the father–daughter relationship are also economically adumbrated via the unexplained bloodstain. This stain, like the caress, is ambiguously framed. Legible either as a mark of menarche or the (incestuous) loss of virginity, the bloodstain heralds the possibility of reproduction as a threat, interpellating Monte as desiring lover as well as father. The stain moreover echoes the bloody rock, visible in a flashback, which Monte used to kill a girl on Earth. Desire, taboo and trauma thus coalesce in this image, which evokes the violence both external and intrinsic to their relationship. The evocation of Monte's traumatic past on Earth is intensified by the dialogue in this scene. Angry at being ejected from his bed, Willow is vengeful. 'You killed your friend over a dog', she accuses. The moment offers a stark articulation of the opposition of intimacy and violence in the film, reminding us that their caring relationship is elaborated in dialectical opposition to Monte's violent past. The image of Monte and Willow in bed echoes the closeness and

intimacy of the scenes of Willow's babyhood, yet the moment also points to the ways in which violence threatens to invade sites of care. Thus the relationship bears the indelible trace of the violence of its genesis: as Denis's comment implies, in *High Life* the reproductive impetus of Dibs's regime – the idea of 'starting a new humanity' – remains in the possibility of the relationship between Monte and Willow. As such, when we first encounter Willow in young adulthood, the relationship is overshadowed by the threat of violence, figured in this moment through the ambiguous caress and stained sheets.

Viewing these two films together allows for the entanglements of care and exploitation to come closer into view. In *High Life*'s fraught visual economy, the spectre of violence within sites of care is staged overtly, while in *35 Shots of Rum* neither violence nor violation is ever brought to representation. Instead, in a film which opposes care and labour, the ambiguity (and asymmetry) of Joséphine and Lionel's relationship signals the ways in which care becomes transactional, as the logics of capital threaten to intrude into the domestic space. In the opposition of the film's two realms – the domestic and the socio-economic – the film elaborates a dialectical opposition of care and capital. Yet the first scenes in the flat, where she cooks supper and brings Lionel his slippers when he arrives home from work, establish Joséphine as attentive primary caregiver. If the pair are legible as a couple 'at first glance', Denis is thinking of the division of labour in the heterosexual relationship in highly normative terms (which echo Fraser's understanding of the gendering of unpaid domestic labour under capitalism).<sup>31</sup> Joséphine takes on the care of her father following her mother's death. By gesturing to the possibility of an erotic relationship in these opening sequences and in the subsequent scenes described here, Denis raises the possibility that Joséphine takes on not only domestic but also sexual labour. While she is framed as a willing participant in the ambiguous touch during the bed scene, the fantasmatic horse-ride sequence and the acts of domestic care, the sense that her role as replacement 'wife' is in some way oppressive is addressed by Lionel via the double meaning, sexual and literal, when he tells her to 'feel free' – the use of the imperative subtly undercutting the emancipatory intention of the statement. By grounding its valorization of forms of care within images that trope their possibility as exploitative and even transactional, the film refuses to unequivocally frame the domestic as a site that contests the logics of capital.

In both films Denis thus presents scenes of intimacy and care that trope the possibility of incest while withholding certainty. As Denis allows the possibility of incest to hover, she points in each film to the ways in which forms of exploitation and unequal power relations may be reproduced at the heart of the domestic. The films' subtle evocation of the incestuous contours of these father–daughter relationships opens onto political critique. As such, while in both narratives the foregrounding of tender care frames the father–daughter relationship as a site beyond the rapacity of capital and the violence of forced reproduction, the logics of

31 Fraser, 'Contradictions of capital and care', p. 102.

these regimes repeatedly threaten to invade the site of care. Yet beyond this subtle mirroring of exploitative logics within the familial context, focusing on the affective impact of the ambiguous framing of the father–daughter relationship opens up further dimensions of the films’ political strategies. Turning now to questions of affect, I examine the connections between incest, affect and politics in these two films.

In his book *The Feel-Bad Film*, Lübecker explores the role of displeasure in Denis’s cinema, from the unease provoked by the framing of serial killer Camille in *I Can’t Sleep*, to the experience of witnessing the incestuous sex act in *Bastards*. Lübecker argues that in *I Can’t Sleep* Denis creates discomfort via moral indeterminacy: she ‘interrupt[s] the socio-political discourses we commonly [...] deploy when we are faced with tragedies [...] and cases of extreme human evil’.<sup>32</sup> As a result, we are prevented from casting any straightforward moral judgement on the protagonist, and catharsis is refused.<sup>33</sup> In ‘refusing to take a moral stand’, Denis elaborates an ‘ethics of suspension’.<sup>34</sup> For Lübecker, ‘the confusion and frustration that suspension films produce can be an excellent way of opening up the political sphere’, as these films ‘raise the question of whether our desires to judge, act, oppose and seek closure sometimes help to consolidate’ the existing social discourses which govern visibility and recognizability (and thus exclusion and marginalization).<sup>35</sup> Lübecker writes likewise that *Bastards* is marked by ‘an ambiguity that no political or ethical framing helps to stabilise’.<sup>36</sup> Thus he suggests that Denis eschews a moral tenor: here, ‘as in *I Can’t Sleep* the provocation of this film largely comes from it taking on controversial material without offering the moral framing one might expect’.<sup>37</sup>

In *35 Shots of Rum* and *High Life*, too, unease is experienced but cannot be neutralized and integrated via straightforward moral condemnation. Yet Denis arguably takes her refusal of catharsis further here. In *I Can’t Sleep* and *Bastards*, judgement is suspended: in the former, Lübecker notes, Denis ‘never gives the spectator enough material to fully establish a psychological or sociological explanation’ for the serial killer’s actions; she ‘refus[es] to take a moral stand’, and thus increases ‘the distance between traumatic events and a judgement that would provide closure’.<sup>38</sup> Yet in both films discussed by Lübecker, the violent events and their aftermath are staged visually and unequivocally. There is an actuality to the murders in *I Can’t Sleep* and to the sex act between father and daughter in *Bastards*, and Denis refuses either to rationalize or condemn them. In *35 Shots of Rum* and *High Life*, the indeterminacy between care and desire produces feelings of discomfort but no incestuous act ever takes place on-screen. Through implicit visual and verbal allusions and ambiguous framing, reinforced on an extra-filmic level by explicit statements in interviews and publicity material, Denis constantly returns her viewer’s gaze to the erotic contours of the father–daughter relationship. In her framing of tactile intimacies

32 Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 81.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 75–77.

shared between father and daughter in these two films, Denis invites us to consider inherent power imbalances and possibilities for violation. Yet these possibilities are not made explicit, and are never directly actualized; rather, it is their suggestion that produces discomfort. Denis asks us to observe the *possibility* of transgression, and refuses to condemn that possibility.<sup>39</sup> Discomfort is felt, but it is not clear if any traumatic event has occurred: the evocations of incest are so subtle and oblique that these feelings have no purchase on the subject matter.

As these slippery scenes resist our comprehension, their affective impact becomes diffuse. Discomfort thus operates in a manner akin to threat in Galt's reading of *Bastards*, where she writes that 'threat is distributed [...], a function of cinematic form rather than narrated via character agency or causality'.<sup>40</sup> Where, in *Bastards*, it is the *mise-en-scène* of menacing surveillance and patriarchal threat, in *35 Shots of Rum* and *High Life* it is ethical and epistemological uncertainty that makes affect exceed its immediate referent, impacting our reception of the film beyond the ambiguous scenes themselves.

This creation of excess, dispersed negative affect can be viewed as a political strategy.<sup>41</sup> Reading the films via Ngai's theorization of 'ugly feelings', therefore, we might view Denis's provocatively ambiguous framing of fathers and daughters here as a means of producing negative emotion, which in turn inflects and informs our understanding of the broader political contexts of the films and of our own political context. Like the diffuse and unmapable discomfort produced by the subtle suggestion of incestuous desire in these films, ugly feelings can lack intentionality and legibility;<sup>42</sup> they can exceed (or fly under the radar of) the comprehension of the subject experiencing them.<sup>43</sup> As such, ugly feelings cannot easily be put to work in the service of political action. Yet these unworkable affects are politically revealing, since they reflect the experience of political dispossession and suspended agency. As Ngai writes, 'The unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action is precisely what amplifies their power to diagnose situations, and situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular'.<sup>44</sup> In the films I explore here, Denis uses negative affect as a tool for indirectly evoking political frustrations and injustices, while simultaneously configuring these problems as unresolvable. Thus the discomfort produced by the ambiguous framing of the father–daughter relationship acts as a sign for broader political malaise. It can be viewed as a strategy for obliquely representing the suspension of political agency and the dispossession of the characters and communities represented in the films. Crucially these feelings remain frustratingly weak, dispersed, ambivalent. Yet it is precisely this diffuse discomfort that is so politically impactful (if not actionable): it reflects, and invites us to attend to, the social powerlessness at stake in their narratives.

A key example of this politics of discomfort may be observed in the celebrated 'bar scene' in *35 Shots of Rum*, where Lionel, Joséphine,

39 Denis's investment in incest as possibility is underscored in an interview in which she describes the incest narrative in *Les Salauds* as 'a possible story' (*une histoire possible*). See Jean-Sébastien Chauvin and Serge Daney, 'Entretien: L'irrémediable. Dialogue avec Claire Denis', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 691 (2013), pp. 82–88.

40 Rosalind Galt, 'Claire Denis's capitalist bastards', *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2015), p. 284. As Galt observes, this diffuse affective quality of Denis's work is also highlighted in Elena del Río's reading of *Beau Travail*, which describes an 'affective realm that goes beyond subjectivity and character to involve the film body as a sensation-producing machine'. Elena del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 160; qtd in Galt, 'Claire Denis's capitalist bastards', p. 281.

41 Galt proposes a political reading of dispersed hostility, arguing via Louis-Georges Schwartz's concept of 'Cinema Hostis' that Denis 'forms a particularly sustained engagement with the hostile condition of contemporary transnational capital'. Galt, 'Claire Denis's capitalist bastards', p. 282.

42 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 1–3.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

44 *Ibid.*

Gabrielle (Lionel's ex-girlfriend, played by Nicole Dogué) and Noé (Joséphine's love interest, played by Grégoire Colin) are caught in the rain and seek shelter in a nearby bar. The owner (Adèle Ado) welcomes them in, despite it being after hours, and offers them blankets and food; the characters begin to dance. After dancing with Lionel, Joséphine dances with Noé; they briefly kiss and break apart. Lionel dances with the bar owner, and it is implied that he spends the night with her. Critics have emphasized a turning towards future configurations of community in this scene, foregrounding gestures of welcome and openness.<sup>45</sup>

Asibong argues that the bar offers a space for Joséphine and Lionel to dance together in a manner that 'breaks with the general terms of dancing established in so many of Denis's earlier films', where 'either dancing is overwhelming and destructive in its intensity, or else it constitutes a broken, missed affair, a series of rejections and repulsions'.<sup>46</sup> Yet it is possible to read the dance here as (quietly) 'overwhelming and destructive in its intensity'. Significantly, in this moment, the private ambiguity of Lionel and Joséphine's relationship spills over into the public space. The pair stand for a moment, outside the rhythms of dance which surround them. They gaze deeply into each other's eyes, lips twitching as if in anticipation of a kiss. The film extends the duration and the tension of this shot for a moment, before the intensity of their pose is resolved by Joséphine, who rests her head on Lionel's shoulder.

Wheatley describes this dance as 'a highly charged sequence of sexual tension, which seems as much a struggle as an embrace', and suggests that the 'gleaming skin of Jo's shoulders, lovingly caressed by Lionel, becomes a landscape to be fought for in Noé's hands'.<sup>47</sup> In his analysis of the scene, James S. Williams states that, 'a sudden surge of physical desire is peremptorily cut short before it can explode into being'.<sup>48</sup>

Williams is speaking here of the seductive flare that passes between Lionel and the bar owner. Yet Williams's reading might also apply to the desire between Lionel and Joséphine, which threatens to pass from potentiality to actuality in this scene. If we follow the play of gazes here, it is only once the dance of exchanged looks between Lionel and Joséphine has ended (and after Lionel's implied observation of the kiss between Joséphine and Noé) that Lionel turns his attention to the bar owner. Denis actually states that Lionel's implied affair is 'empty' and 'unimportant', perhaps to underscore its role as a stand-in for the unrealized father-daughter affair.<sup>49</sup> In the public space, this display of intimacy between Lionel and Joséphine, a spectral suggestion of sexual taboo, frays the delicate social fabric. The dance is quickly interrupted by Noé, and the tone of the scene swiftly becomes tense and mournful, the pacing abortive. Although new connections are made in the scene, they are ambivalently framed: beyond the breakdown of the dance between Noé and Joséphine, what Denis terms Lionel's 'empty' seduction of the bar owner might be read as a jealous reaction to Noé's commandeering of his daughter. Here as elsewhere, for Denis dance is both an

<sup>45</sup> See Asibong, 'Claire Denis's flickering spaces of hospitality', pp. 154–67; Williams, 'Romancing the father', pp. 44–50.

<sup>46</sup> Asibong, 'Claire Denis's flickering spaces of hospitality', p. 164.

<sup>47</sup> Wheatley, 'La Famille Denis', p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, 'Romancing the father', p. 47.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

50 For further analysis of the use of dance in *Denis*, see Laura McMahon, 'Rhythms of relationality: Denis and dance', in Vecchio (ed.), *The Films of Claire Denis*, pp. 175–200.

51 Williams, 'Romancing the father', p. 47.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

opportunity for intimate contact and a mapping of desire, jealousy, fear and anger through movement and the vectors of the gaze.<sup>50</sup>

Negative affect surges in to mediate the aesthetic and the political, reminding the spectator of the broader tensions that cut across any apparent harmony in the scene. For while the rain outside and the owner's gesture of welcome make the bar a haven, the film remains attentive to forms of inhospitality. Williams notes that the song that soundtracks this moment – 'Nightshift' by the Commodores – is 'a tribute song to the memory of soul singers Jackie Wilson and Marvin Gaye [which] tells of leaving the "dayshift" (i.e. life on earth) and starting the "nightshift" in heaven'.<sup>51</sup> For Williams, 'The idea of shifting corresponds to the structure and function of this scene where relationships are reconfigured and desire safely channelled'.<sup>52</sup> A less optimistic reading is possible, however, as the song, through its titular metaphor, implicitly draws a link between death and labour, its usage here subtly gesturing towards René's suicide and the sociopolitical conditions that make it inevitable (Denis describes René as a 'character condemned to death').<sup>53</sup> In the song title's parallel between life and death, dayshift and nightshift, the 'natural' temporalities of the human lifespan are hellishly reconfigured through capitalistic chronologies of labour. As if to underscore René's alignment with the song's evocation of the overlapping of capitalistic time, day, night and death, Denis describes him as an "'alarm clock" in the narrative'.<sup>54</sup> Thus, even in this moment of (temporary) hospitality, Denis reminds us that the refuge offered by the bar is an exception to the oppressive social structures that govern the lives of the films' protagonists. In the passage from the uncomfortable framing of Joséphine and Lionel to this oblique evocation of the film's sociopolitical contexts, Denis uses the suggestion of incestuous desire to elicit negative spectatorial responses while retaining epistemological uncertainty, thereby creating subtle, diffuse and unmappable discomfort, which in turn evokes and reflects political malaise.

At the same time, in both films discomfort is occasionally elicited by a more clearly defined object. Negative affect is also introduced via what Ngai terms a 'poetics of disgust', tied to imagery which elicits a more 'urgent and specific' response.<sup>55</sup> As 'an object created by social taboos and prohibitions', 'dialectically conjoined' to desire, disgust seems particularly apt for thinking through the politics of incest narratives.<sup>56</sup> As a stronger affect, it represents the 'outer limit' of ugly feelings and 'prepar[es] us for more instrumental or politically efficacious emotions'.<sup>57</sup> Thus 'the poetics of disgust [draws] us closer to the domain of political theory, perhaps even of political commitment' than any other ugly feeling. Yet Ngai argues that disgust 'does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully'.<sup>58</sup> It does so in part by exposing the absence of a language for expressing *political* disgust, due to the bourgeois 'moralization of aversive rhetoric' (a phenomenon that Denis arguably instrumentalizes in her affective

55 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 337.

56 Ibid., pp. 332–33.

57 Ibid., p. 354.

58 Ibid., p. 353.

59 Ibid., p. 338.

60 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

61 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 353.

62 Piette, 'Claire Denis' (my translation).

strategies).<sup>59</sup> In the films examined here, Denis elaborates a political poetics of disgust, deploying abject imagery that functions as a cipher (and an affective vector) for political critique.

In *35 Shots of Rum*, the discomfort elicited by the ambiguous intimacy of the dance shared by Joséphine and Lionel overflows the bounds of the bar scene, culminating in an eruption of the abject in the scene which follows. Joséphine, Noé and Gabrielle return home on the night bus; the next morning, still in their evening wear, they share breakfast in Noé's flat. The trio are positioned awkwardly around Noé's table, as if to emphasize the unusual absence of Lionel. Unlike shots of Lionel and Joséphine's domestic contentment, this interior scene is coldly lit. If lighting and mise-en-scene denote the spread of discomfort, this negative affect is intensified when the camera turns to the corpse of Noé's cat, which he unceremoniously stuffs into a bin bag. The corpse disgusts; it is, in Julia Kristeva's terms, 'the most sickening of wastes [...] Abject.'<sup>60</sup> The death of the cat – and the abject image of its discarded body – might be considered an apt symbol for incest as abjection at the heart of the domestic. Yet the moment also mirrors the discovery of René's body after his suicide. The appearance of René's body is experienced as a far more shocking event, yet in both cases the narrative enacts the eruptive abjection of death via the sudden and unexpected discovery of a dead body. As I have suggested, René's suicide reflects the context of race- and class-based precarity wherein life is unsupported, and certain lives are left less supported than others. Yet these contexts remain unspoken in the aftermath of his death. Here, then, in Ngai's terms, Denis elaborates a poetics of disgust, as the abjection of death 'diagnose[s] powerfully' the 'dilemma of social powerlessness' by pointing to the impossibility of political agency, and to the absence of language for expressing political disgust.<sup>61</sup>

In *High Life*, too, abject images erupt in the narrative. Willow's very existence is ushered in under the sign of abjection, via the images of Boyse's milk-stained body. Yet in chronological terms, disgust is first manifested in an earlier scene where the connection between taboo and food is made via the recognition that Monte and Willow 'eat [their] own shit'. Beyond this uncomfortable alignment of food and faeces, the acknowledgement in this moment of the circular ecology of the spaceship bears wider significance. Denis states that this moment stages the realization for Monte of the possibility of incest: 'there is the bond of life, more than the bond of blood, which only occurs to him when he talks to her about taboos'.<sup>62</sup> Like a form of contagion, each abject image brings forth further abject images: thus the 'bond of blood' is visualized later in the blood-stained sheets. Yet while the abject is a figure for the incest taboo, the eruption of the abject is also a means by which the film stages its broader political stakes. As in *35 Shots of Rum*, Denis elaborates a poetics of disgust via the spectacle of death. The first corpses we encounter in *High Life* are those of Monte's fellow inmates, which have been entombed in a freezing room. In an effort to preserve the ship's



63 Wilson, 'Love me tender', p. 19.

waning supplies of fuel, Monte drags the bodies to the hatch and casts them out into space. This sequence occurs after the film's opening scenes, in which Monte tends to baby Willow. Cryogenically preserved in the moment of their death, the dead bodies are a bridge between the necropolitical contours of Dibs's regime, in which death is an instrument of domination, and Monte's new reality. Through their time in the deep freeze, the bodies are intact; there is a curious disavowal of the materiality of decay here. Nonetheless, in spite of the cryogenic suspension of decomposition, these bodies remind Monte of the deadly dimensions of the preceding regime, which remain embedded in the ship. The motif of suspension is sustained as the title of the film appears on screen against the backdrop of the bodies floating outside the ship. In the extended temporality of the moment, the bodies hang, suspended in zero gravity: Wilson suggests that 'The corpses fall with narcotic slowness through space'.<sup>63</sup> Via the visuality of suspension in the title sequence, Denis gestures towards the state of suspension – the prisoners' unprotected status – that is thematized in the film. (The bodies recall the prone, unconscious forms of Monte and Boyse in the rape/conception scene.) Yet we might also think here of Lübecker's theorization of an 'ethics of suspension' in his reading of narratives where no stable moral grounding is offered to the spectator. In removing the bodies from the ship, Monte may seek to exorcise the history of domination and death that precedes his life with Willow. Yet the impossibility of their bond is encoded in this sequence: Monte's jettisoning of the bodies anticipates the suicidal gesture of father and daughter in the film's final scene, as they cast off into space in a small shuttle. As it recalls the violence of the past regime, and anticipates the film's violent ending, the title sequence seems to signal the indeterminacy and indiscernibility at the heart of the film's ethical thinking. This is an indiscernibility which is most clearly embodied in the father–daughter relationship, as the film refuses to distinguish between normative love and desire, but also, by implication, between consent and violation, care and exploitation.

In *35 Shots of Rum*, ambiguity is grounded in the refusal of a legible distinction between familial and erotic intimacies. It is an ambiguity that calls forth feelings of discomfort and thwarted agency, which can be mapped onto the intolerable affective experience of marginalization and the domination of capital. In *High Life* the ambivalent framing of paternal devotion contaminated by the spectre of erotic domination indicates the impossibility of escaping the deadly and abject logics of the prison spaceship. In viewing these films, the spectator is implicated in this spectacle of undecidability between paternal love and exploitation. From the subtle staging of ambiguous looks and gestures between father and daughter, to the bleak evocations of the abjection that persists or intrudes even in sites of intimacy and domesticity, Denis's films make the spectator experience intractably negative feelings. I have suggested, via Ngai, that Denis uses the spectral suggestion of incest, intertwined with a concomitant sense of unease and disgust, as a means to make the

64 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 353.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

66 *Ibid.*

spectator experience the negative emotions associated with political dispossession and exploitation. Yet if this is a political strategy for representing the ‘dilemma of social powerlessness’, it remains a profoundly unsettling and provocative one.<sup>64</sup> For although the films bring exploitative systems of power into view, incest acts as an ethical sticking point, stalling optimistic readings of these films as engaged cinema. As such, the films refuse any coherent political and ethical reading; there remains an affective excess which cannot be easily conceptualized and thus redeemed as a political strategy. The connection between the films’ political investments and their affective address to the spectator can be read with Ngai as a strategy which produces ambiguous, weakly negative feelings as ‘signs that [...] render visible different registers of problem’ – yet refuse any workable political critique.<sup>65</sup> Rather, these films manifest and produce negative affects which diagnose the impossibility of their own instrumentalization: ‘negative affects that read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency’.<sup>66</sup> This obstructed state of being is manifested both in the spectatorial experience of the films’ moral worlds, and in the diegetic experiences and actions of the protagonists of *35 Shots of Rum* and *High Life* (via the emphasis in both narratives on forms of domination, powerlessness and marginalization). Denis thus establishes an affective symmetry between the spectator’s deferred and destabilized moral grounding, and the protagonists’ lack of political recourse or power.

67 Wilson, ‘Love me tender’, p. 21.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

69 *Ibid.*

Questions of trauma and abuse (and the conditions of consent in the incestuous paradigm) complicate any optimistic reading of Denis’s strategies in these films. It is perhaps for this reason that these narratives tend towards suicide. As Wilson writes, ‘Monte’s last words to Willow are “Shall we?” Entering the black hole, dying, and consenting to incestuous love are bound as one.’<sup>67</sup> This is also the fate of Justine and her father in *Bastards*. Only Joséphine escapes this fate: the threat of incestuous desire is neutralized in narrative terms via her marriage to Noé. Yet *35 Shots of Rum* does not end on a triumphant note. As Wilson suggests, the title bespeaks the ‘nearly lethal dose’ of alcohol that we see Lionel preparing to consume at the end of the film.<sup>68</sup> Wilson observes that ‘For all the understated hopes of the film, there remains a sense that ahead lies an alcohol coma and a plunge into the void’ – an ending which, for Wilson, anticipates the ‘irrevocable and unmissable end point’ that is envisaged by the end of *High Life*.<sup>69</sup> This narrative failure reflects the failure that is encoded in the films’ own framing of their critiques of the exploitation of bodies and lives: critiques that constantly gesture to their own impossibility via their grounding within a challenging and impossible ethical model. Ultimately, then, the epistemological and ethical instability of incest in the films becomes a means of enacting the evacuation of political certainty that marks the contemporary moment. Beyond mere provocation, this extreme ethical model of impossibility signals the unravelling of any workable political agenda. Thus, while I

have traced the oppositional possibilities of Denis's affective strategies here, incest ultimately emerges as a figure for the impossible horizon of politics, a sign through which to figure the affect of unworkable political critique.