Digital Vision and the Noir Hero in Claire Denis’ *Bastards*

Spencer Everhart
York University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol5/iss1/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cinesthesia by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
As with most directors whose careers began with (and consisted of) the process of filmmaking with actual celluloid, it was only a matter of time before French auteur Claire Denis made the transition to digital – and it was in 2013 that she did just that, abandoning physical film in favor of digital cinema for her neo-noir feature *Bastards*. The decision to switch wasn’t reluctant, though, as Denis had expressed an interest in experimenting with the format on her previous film *White Material* (2009). This aesthetic receptiveness is evident in *Bastards*, as it illustrates Denis’ effort to go beyond mere use and craft a film whose nature as a digital work is directly embedded into its neo-noir narrative. She accomplishes this through both a genre-oriented utilization of digital cinematography and by ending the movie with a formal rupture that re-contextualizes the digital nature of the film.

Set in the cold urban milieu of contemporary Paris, the film follows sea captain Marco as he leaves his duty on a ship to return to the city at the request of his sister Sandra after her husband Jacques kills himself and her daughter Justine is hospitalized for sexual abuse. Sandra suspects the wealthy businessman Edouard Laporte is the cause of these events along with her family’s collapse and wants her brother to take vengeful action. Marco’s attempt at revenge involves seducing Laporte’s mistress Raphaëlle and insinuating his way into their lives while working to discover the reality
behind his brother-in-law’s suicide and the injuries inflicted upon his niece. These plot machinations recall the layout of a traditional noir schematic: corruption, deceit, and betrayal as the backdrop; Raphaëlle represents the dubious femme fatale; Marco is the hard-boiled man-of-few-words called to action to search for the truth and restore order. Consequently, it is this last aspect – the archetypal noir hero’s journey – that informs Denis’ strategic use of digital cinematography.

Working with cinematographer Agnès Godard (the filmmaker’s longtime collaborator), Denis chose the Canon Red Epic camera to shoot Bastards, and its ultra-high resolution and extreme clarity is aligned with Marco’s perspective throughout the film. This juxtaposition recalls D.N. Rodowick’s characterization of the digital camera as “…a computer with a lens as an input device…a device for converting inputs to symbolic notation” (Rodowick 121). Essentially playing detective, Marco’s righteous determination and sober approach embodies the Red Epic’s precise vision, collecting and interpreting evidence just as the digital camera collects and interprets visual information. Furthermore, Rodowick describes digital representation as a relation “…not to an image, but to function or force – that of control and the management of information,” with the ultimate desire “…to sort, organize, give access to, and act on information in the present” (Rodowick 141). Marco’s efforts directly correlate with this concept, exemplifying Denis’ construction of a character/camera union through a genre-based narrative trait. Thus, the noir protagonist’s quest and certain attributes of the digital medium are joined in a parallel of form and content.

As is usual with Denis’ aesthetic sensibility, the camerawork in Bastards has a fluidly observant and roaming quality: focusing on details, searching for clues, taking in
the textures and atmosphere of the environment. Conceptually, this is analogous to Marco and his striving for answers, but it also reflects his limited point of view. Indeed, Denis herself intended for “…the film [to see] no more than he understands,” and it is the restrictions of perception that ultimately lead to his undoing (Ehrlich). Marco arrogantly believes he can convince Raphaëlle to leave Laporte even though he provides her and her son Joseph with a lifestyle of safety and stability. When Laporte learns of Marco and Raphaëlle’s trysts, he sets out to steal Joseph away, prompting Marco to attack him. Raphaëlle, in turn, shoots Marco dead because her choice – which Marco fails to realize – is not between the Hero and the Villain (or Good and Evil), but between her new lover and a secure life with her young son. Despite his seemingly comprehensive viewpoint, Marco’s foolhardy confidence as an action-taking noir hero blinds him to the extent of the circumstances he has set out to rectify.

In this sense, Denis’ aim with her deployment of a noir hero is actually subversion. Rather than find truth and restore order, the masculine archetype fails and dies. Paralleled with the movie’s sleek visual quality, this breakdown communicates what seems to be Denis’ suspicion of the digital image. If the lucidity of the hero/camera’s sight is not enough to succeed, then what is the fundamental benefit of such high-definition clarity? Similar notions have been expressed by Steven Shaviro, who claims that due to the manipulability of digital pictures “…we can no longer put our faith in the truth-value of such images” and that they “…are no longer objective…no longer carry their own self-evidence…” (Shaviro 65). He argues how “…the very shift from analog to digital destroys the indexical nature of the [image]. Digital photography is no longer mimetic” (Shaviro 65). Therefore, the technological possibilities of digital images
actually divorce their representations of the world from a foundation in veracity. These ideas coincide with Denis’ formulation of Bastards’ crestfallen climax as she renders impotent the narrative and visual power of her protagonist/camera amalgamation.

One last scene follows Marco’s death, however, and the ending complicates this distrust as Denis enacts a bold gesture that reframes the movie’s digital nature. Bastards’ final sequence depicts a video sent to Sandra that she views with Justine’s doctor. After a brief glimpse of a projector’s lens, the footage is presented in full view without a reverse shot of the two watching. It is comprised of a series of angles, captured by a personal camcorder, that reveal the horrible reality undergirding the film’s events: both Laporte and Justine’s father Jacque were directly responsible for the teenage girl’s sexual abuse. The images are murky from heavy pixilation and obscured by low light levels, a stark contrast to the Red Epic’s pristine resolution. In support of her diegesis, Denis shot this footage on a low-grade video camera, introducing a formal rupture into the fabric of the movie. Commenting on the ending, the filmmaker said she “…didn’t want the image to be ugly, but I wanted the image to be clandestine” (Ehrlich). No less (or more) digital than what the Red Epic captured in HD, this sequence presents a digital representation alternative to earlier in the film; it is, after all, a recording of the truth Marco was seeking that incited the story’s chain of events. Despite its lo-fi visual quality, the finale nonetheless offers a
digital vision of reality – one disconnected from Marco’s standpoint. Denis’ flourish here, then, contends for the power (regardless of technological inferiority) of digital divorced from a particular subjectivity, a separation that results in what Marco was unable to accomplish: the revealing of that which was hidden.

Concomitant with the tragedy of a family degraded and torn apart is the perceptual tragedy of *Bastards*, a failure to see beyond oneself and realize the truth – or a truth – outside the boundaries of one’s own perspective. Claire Denis explicates this conflict through her employment of two different forms of digital cinematography and their integration into her genre-based narrative. Such a formally reflexive and medium-specific approach is just one manner in which film artists are grappling with the beast that is digital cinema, and it points to the creative possibilities and aesthetic potential of this contemporary filmmaking technology.
Works Cited

