



### ***Péril en la Demeure* :**

#### Domestic Danger and Social Distance

*Péril en la Demeure* (Danger in the House), a 1985 film by Michel Deville, is a “divertissement qui fait songer à du Ionesco cadré par Hitchcock.”<sup>1</sup> Erroneous as it may seem, *L'Année du Cinéma* pinpoints the themes at work in Michel Deville's creation as well as the nature of its formal construction. Like Ionesco, *Péril* addresses the dynamic phenomenon of human interaction and, more specifically, the distance that separates one human from another. Like Hitchcock, the formal elements of *Péril* echo and support the interaction between characters, creating a subtext that addresses the film's theme of distance from an abstracted point of view. As strangers, acquaintances, lovers, and enemies, *Péril's* characters explore the distances that distinguish them. Each character bridges the distance in a unique way; therefore, the results of these explorations vary with the individual. Deville's camera work and editing construct visual equivalents of the actors' *jeu*. Between scenes and individual shots, Deville plays with temporal as well as spatial distances. These two realms transgress their boundaries, however, as characters parody the visual, and vice versa, in a reflexive cross commentary. *Péril* is, indeed, a “divertissement,” for it takes the spectator into the heart of human interaction—that reality where illusion and ambiguity flourish.

Within *Péril's* narrative, the “introduction” acts as a leitmotif, employing social distances as a metaphorical vehicle for a broader commentary. Julia introduces herself to David; Edwige introduces herself to Julia, then to David; David is introduced to

Graham and Viviane; Daniel introduces himself to David, and so on, as Deville attempts to create a complex out of otherwise isolated individuals. Unusually strong emphasis is placed on these formal introductions. Deville used them as substitutions for expository information. If the narrative advances at all, it is a result of these initial meetings, for all activity to follow takes place within the dialogues of new acquaintances. With this pattern set, viewers are cued to direct their attention to the nature of these acquaintances. Perceptible differences characterize each one as individual psyches impose themselves on the relationships that ensue.

Julia, Edwige, and Daniel “ont tous l'air d'avoir plein d'idée derrière [leurs] tête[s].”<sup>2</sup> Each character deals with the distance of human interaction according to their own perceptions of reality. By studying the ways in which these characters approach David, we develop a blueprint for their subsequent actions, which Deville does not betray. Julia's life, as characterized by the screenplay, “is not a tragedy, but a drama.” As an actress, her nature is to entice, to mesmerize, but never to reveal the reality behind the illusion. She approaches David with theatricality, reminding him twice that he “do[es] not know her.” Even though she has shared many intimate moments with him, “elle ne croit plus à une issue sentimentale heureuse dans une relation avec un homme.”<sup>3</sup> Always onstage, Julia maintains this enticing distance by creating dramatic disorder in David's loft in

an extended exit that is repeated in various forms throughout *Pénil*.

If Julia approaches David with dishonesty, Daniel is the painful opposite. As an honest man of principle, he is ironically candid in his approach to David. Daniel chooses to use the distance between the two men to build a bond of trust. This is symbolized in the film by his initial confession, the dinner, the handshake, and the gift of the gun. Unlike the ambiguous, erotic distance between Julia and David, the space between Daniel and David is clearly defined by a masculine code of honor and, unlike the Julia/David bond, is clearly transgressed when David betrays Daniel's trust. Edwige approaches social distance in a refreshing, if unconventional, manner. Like Daniel, she too has principles, yet they dictate a different strategy. To the constant stupefaction of David, Edwige acts as a mirror to the young man's failings. With unparalleled candor, Edwige broaches a scandalous subject when David takes her to a "seedy" bar. She buys a "popular" guitar album over a classical one, subverting David's musical pretensions. By calling David's videotape "porno," she forces him to confess that he is not aware, leaving the man with unmasked reflections of himself. All three characters, therefore, take dynamic positions toward David. Julia is seductive yet always in and out of his reach. Daniel is ardently, and foolishly, steadfast in his freely given trust. Edwige is similarly steadfast yet disarms David through reflection, refusing to involve herself actively.

Formally, "Deville semble impliquer que l'image aussi peut être piégée et que tout, finalement, n'est qu'illusions et jeu."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the manipulation of inter/intra-shot visualizations plays an equally active role in constructing Deville's commentary on interpersonal distance. *Pénil's* visual aspect, however, has a different agenda. It deals with the abstract qualities of temporal and spatial distance. Throughout the film, Deville compresses time by manipulating spatio-temporal reality. In one shot, we see David lying in bed. The following shot shows him reaching up toward what we reasonably anticipate to be the headboard but

what, in fact, is shown to be a kitchen cupboard and canister of coffee. Likewise, David, in the shower, reaches to turn off the faucet but ends up ringing the Tomstays' doorbell. These compressions of space and time anticipate important events and cleverly simulate David's anxiety as his mind races ahead of the film frame.

Compressing in a different way, *Pénil's* visuals save time by combining mute images into a form of Eisenteinian montage that quickly conveys important information. For example, to prepare viewers for a meeting between Julia and David, we see the images of Viviane, a phone booth, a large globe sculpture, and Julia's car. These different images, once synthesized, foreshadow the revelation that Viviane has been kidnapped and that the small, antique globe is the ransom demanded for her life. Perhaps most symbolically, the credits of *Pénil* display a drawing of a "demeure" with its door ajar, followed by a collection of disparate objects. We can decode this series as a metaphor for the disparate adventures that will revolve around this domicile and its resident family. Just as the camera comments on the narrative, the characters in *Pénil* playfully mimic the camera work. David, preparing for Julia's visit, sweeps dirt under his rug, compressing his work time. Edwige and David, to quicken the film's pace, often delete spoken dialogue, assuming that the other character, as well as viewers, will be able to follow. Both visual and mimicked compressions of time lend an urgency to the action, creating the mysterious, anxious pace needed to bring *Pénil's* rather calm development to climax.

*Pénil en la Demeure* "n'est pas policier dans la mesure où l'on ne cherche pas à découvrir l'identité du coupable, mais il relève du genre dans sa quête d'une vérité insaisissable."<sup>5</sup> If that truth is within apprehension, it exists between the characters—in the air that compresses and disperses as the individuals approach (as well as flee) each other. Michel Deville, through character development and image manipulation, defines that dangerous space, which—for better or worse—is irresistibly compelling.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniele Heymann and Alain Lacombe, *L'Année du Cinéma 1985* (Marigny-Le-Chatel: Calmann-Levy, 1985), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Chion, "Pour une portée de musique," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 368 (February 1985): 43–44.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Garcia, "Nicole Garcia sur Pénil en la demeure," *La Revue du Cinéma*, no. 402 (February 1985): 12–13.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Guerif, "Pénil en la demeure: Insaisissable vérité," *La Revue du Cinéma*, no. 402 (February 1985): 29–30.

<sup>5</sup> Guerif, 29–30.