

WATERSHED

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Programme Notes:

Intense Intimacy: The Cinema of Claire Denis

A Watershed Touring Programme

Screening at Watershed Sun 6 - Wed 30 June



Introduction

“ French film director Claire Denis is one of the world’s most distinctive and significant cinematic voices. Her new film *White Material* (in cinemas 2nd July) takes Denis back to the intensely emotional post-colonial world of Cameroon, the setting for her acclaimed 1988 debut *Chocolat*. In the intervening years Denis has created an intimate, beautiful and poetic cinema. This touring retrospective is a rare opportunity to see this critically acclaimed director’s unique body of work.

Mark Cosgrove, Head of Programme

These programme notes are taken from a multitude of interviews with Claire Denis, articles, and books written on her. They are intended to give a brief overview of her life, career and style - further reading is recommending at the end. There are double points for all Loyalty Card holders and a buy four tickets get one free special offer on this season, so snap up your tickets while you can.

Personal

Claire Denis was born on April 21, 1948, in Paris, the oldest child of a French couple. Denis’ father was a colonial official, one who spoke many African languages, believed in political independence, and who “asked questions about why we were there”.

Her parents were acutely aware of their situation as white colonisers in Africa, an awareness that they obviously passed to their children. When Denis was two months old, they returned to Africa.

Africa

Denis has spoken about her childhood in Africa, of how she loved the continent yet also realised that it was not her homeland: “My father was a colonial functionary, so I knew I was passing through. I didn’t lose my country, because I knew it never belonged to me. Nothing belonged to us... I belonged to a country – France – that I knew nothing about.”

Denis returned to France aged 13 when she and her sister contracted polio and had to go into medical care. Denis felt understandably and unsurprisingly isolated from her contemporaries. In high school, Denis felt “archaic, provincial, ashamed... I felt like I belonged to a different century.”



Love of Cinema and Early Career

“ I discovered the cinema thanks to my mother... She spoke of the cinema, of how she missed it (in Africa), so I had to see what the cinema was about, in order to be like her.

Denis has said she wanted to make films because: “I was absolutely unfit for anything else (Denis started off studying economics, a decision she has said was “completely suicidal”). Cinema appeared to be a territory where I could survive. In *Beau Travail* Galoup says he’s “unfit for civilian life”. Well, when I came to France after having lived in Africa I felt I was unfit for life! The directors working then who interested me were Godard, Bresson, Antonioni and, later, Fellini. But I was just a spectator - I didn’t imagine that I would one day make a film.”

Denis went on to study at IDHEC (Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques), the renowned national French film school that is now called Le Fémis. She graduated in 1972 and entered the film world, beginning as an intern and working as a production assistant, a second assistant director, and a first assistant director. She worked with Jim Jarmusch (*Down by Law*, 1986) and Wim Wenders (*Paris, Texas*, 1984 and *Wings of Desire*, 1987), among others. What she learned from her experience in film production was not the particularities of cinematic style but the strategies of financing and production, of self-reliance and tenacity.

It was during location scouting with Wenders for one of his films that Denis wondered what her own cinematic landscape would be. It was then that she knew she had to return to Africa to make *Chocolat*, her debut film.



About the films

Chocolat (1988)

Denis encountered many difficulties, particularly financial, in the making of *Chocolat*. Although many commentators stress the apparently autobiographical nature of the film, Denis herself has resisted overly simplistic readings of it: “Truthfully, the film isn’t really that connected to my own personal experience, it is really more of a collection of received ideas... it is more a large-scale collective story of the colonisers than the individual story of a white girl and a ‘boy’.”

She avoided any attempt to create an African perspective or point of view: “The experience of whites is always the same. We approach, approach, approach, but we never quite reach the heart of Africa. In *Chocolat*, I always tried to maintain only the perspective of the whites. I just didn’t think I should pretend to understand the black point of view.” Denis admits that *Chocolat* is “essentially a white view of the ‘other’”.

Man No Run (1989)

While filming *Chocolat* Denis met Les Têtes Brulées, a Cameroonian band – she was so taken with their music that she referred to herself as a groupie. “I kept in touch with them as I was editing *Chocolat*, and they wrote me a letter and told me they were coming to France for a tour, their first tour outside of Cameroon. So I managed to find a camera and some film stock and there we were. I didn’t foresee my career. Things happen.”

Man No Run was her first foray into documentaries: she has gone on to make one other feature length documentary (*Vers Mathilde*, 1999) as well as television documentaries and shorts.



I Can't Sleep (1994)

I Can't Sleep was inspired by the notorious case of Thierry Paulin, a young, gay, black HIV-positive man who, in the 1980s in Paris, killed nineteen elderly women with his lover. He died in prison before he was tried for the murders. When making the film, Denis decided to “question ourselves what it is to be the brother, or the mother, or the neighbour of a monster” and not indulge the racism and homophobia that were part of the coverage of his case in the French press.

Despite her care, when the film came out it was viewed as a scandalous resuscitation of the crimes. The French newspaper *France-Soir* did a cover story on the film when it appeared at Cannes with the headline “Paulin, the Killer, a Star at Cannes”.

About the films

Nénette et Boni (1996)

Denis wanted to work again with actors Grégoire Colin (one critic said *Nénette et Boni* was an “ode” to Colin) and Alice Houri, the main protagonists in her 1994 telefilm *U.S. Go Home*: “I felt like I just barely discovered them in *U.S. Go Home*. I was working on another film, based on a book, but I really wanted to work with them again.” The opportunity allowed Denis to continue her exploration of brother-sister relationships: “Personally, I am the oldest child in the family and my younger brother will always be my little brother, even though now he is a grown man with children! And when he talks to me, I’m still his big sister.”

Beau Travail (1999)

Arguably Denis’ most famous film, *Beau Travail* was conceived as a contribution to a television series on “foreign lands” for ARTE. Denis and her co-screenwriter Jean-Pôl Fargeau were inspired by two poems by Herman Melville and his novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*: “For me Africa is like the seas Melville missed so much.”

They wrote two screenplays. The first was called Galoup’s Notebook, which was Galoup’s diary, his memoirs. From that they started to construct the film as its counterpoint. Even in the very early days the project was beset with difficulties, however: since not only did Denis not receive any help from officials in Djibouti (where the film was shot), she had to contend with a swirl of rumours about the film: “What I heard was a real shock: that I was going to make an anti-French army film, then a porn film about Legionnaires and young Ethiopian girls, and then a film about homosexuality in the Legion.”

Choreographer Bernardo Montet was brought in to work with the actors who play the Legionnaires. Denis Lavant (Sgt Galoup) has said he “made us work like animals to learn the ways of the Legion – not only the drill and the endurance, but also the more difficult... the instinctive choreography.”

Trouble Every Day (2001)

When Denis first met Vincent Gallo (during filming for her 1991 short film *Keep It For Yourself*), she was keen to make a film that centred around the actor’s somewhat unusual screen persona: *Trouble Every Day* was the end result. Denis also cites other influences on the film – from the photographs of the Canadian Jeff Wall, the writings of Sheridan Le Fanu, childhood stories about monsters to films ranging from Jacques Tourneur’s *Cat People*, Abel Ferrara’s *The Addiction* and Brian de Palma’s *Dressed to Kill*.

Trouble Every Day was highly controversial when it was released (a reviewer for *Le Monde* ridiculed it by ‘dedicating’ its review of the film to the two women who passed out during its Cannes screening) but Denis downplayed the critics’ accusations of gratuitous violence: “The film is not explicit or violent. It’s actually a love story. It’s about desire and how close the kiss is to the bite. I think every mother wants to eat her baby with love. We just took this on to a new frontier.”



About the films

Friday Night (2002)

Adapted from the 1998 novel by Emmanuèle Bernheim, *Friday Night* was cowritten by Denis and the author. Denis wanted to remain as close to Bernheim's novel as possible: "Emmanuèle kept telling me to be free with her book. But I said no, the space between the lines is too important. The rhythm and the pace of it must be reproduced. And little by little I realised the book was full of music." Valerie Lemercier, best known as a comedian in France, plays the central role of Laure somewhat against type (Denis has described herself, again, as a Lemercier 'groupe'). Vincent Lindon was her first choice for the role of Jean/Frédéric: "For me, from the outset, it was him and no one else".



L'Intrus (2004)

L'Intrus, one of Denis' most mysterious films, takes its title and inspiration from a short book by French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. This was not their first interaction – Nancy has written responses to both *Beau Travail* and *Trouble Every Day*, and Denis made 10-minute short *Vers Nancy*, which focussed on the author. Denis took inspiration from Robert Louis Stevenson and Paul Gauguin's South Seas paintings to create her dreamlike, puzzling film. She explained why she chose to tell the story in such an enigmatic fashion:

“Right away there was something completely unknown to me. Let's say I wanted to do a documentary about Jean-Luc Nancy, a straightforward adaptation of his book. What is this mysterious thing he's explaining in his book? Why a heart? Because, for a surgeon, a heart transplant is honestly easy. And for many surgeons, they say it's like being a plumber. The metaphysical aspect is very heavy, though, because, number one, your heart is tired. The pump is going to stop. You don't know when, but probably you have signs. And for every human, the heart is also a symbol: it's life.

“Number two, the heart that is going to save your life comes from a freshly dead person whom you don't know. Maybe a kid who was crushed by a car in the street or a young woman who committed suicide... whatever. Then the dream starts, because whose heart is it? And then, not only that, but my own body is going to reject that new organ because it doesn't belong to me. In other words, it's an intruder. Though it saves my life, it's sort of making my body ache everywhere because all my cells are fighting against it. So, if you take only that aspect, it's already so big, so vast, you know? I think it means more than any realistic story.”

About the films

Towards Mathilde (2005)

Denis returned to documentary with this 2005 film that focused on Mathilde Monnier, one of France's top choreographers who also had a working relationship with Jean-Luc Nancy.

“*Mathilde Monnier asked me to film one of her ballets, and I told her I had no time for that and no interest. Because she was insistent, I suggested that when I had free time, like two weekends each month or whatever, I'd come and film her work. We did it very simply. My brother did the sound. Agnes or Ellen were doing image, and we did it during a year, and then we edited. I decided it was more my relation to Mathilde presenting her work, as if, as I knew, we look alike in our ways of working. I could feel she wanted me because she felt something similar in me, and she was right. We could be sort of sisters. I think she understood that and it took me a longer time to understand it, but it was very interesting for me in terms of creation.*



35 Shots of Rum (2008)

Denis made *35 Shots of Rum* as homage to Yasujiro Ozu, in particular his father-daughter drama *Late Spring*, and as a celebration of the relationship enjoyed between Denis' mother and grandfather. During the 1960s, Denis took her mother to a retrospective of Ozu's work in Paris: "I could feel that she was touched by the father's presence in Ozu's work. It reminded her of her own father, my grandfather. In Ozu's films, feelings are expressed in a particular way. I could sense that I was making my way to wanting to do a film. I was actually brushing the idea aside because I could not see who could embody that man. I did not want a replica, the story lay somewhere else.

“*My grandfather was Brazilian. I could sense that he was not from France. Being a foreigner, it was as if his only family was his daughter. I realised from a very young age that my mother was the only one who counted. Even when she got married and had children, he was a very unusual grandfather because he was first and foremost our mother's father, much more than our grandfather. We understood that he loved us much less than he loved her. The film project was stuck inside me as I thought that no one could interpret this man.*

White Material (2009)

Isabelle Huppert (Maria) approached Denis asking if she would like to work with her after she made *Friday Night* – *White Material* was the end result. We have a special preview of her newest film on Sun 25 June, then we'll be screening it for two weeks from Fri 2 July. Check back during its run for more programme notes on Denis' return to Africa.

Collaborators

Denis has a team (or as she prefers – a family) of regular collaborators including screenwriter Jean-Pól Fargeau, cinematographer Agnès Godard, editor Nelly Quettier, composer Stuart Staples from The Tindersticks and numerous actors who appear in her films such as Alex Descas, Isaach de Bankolé, Grégoire Colin, Béatrice Dalle and Vincent Gallo.

When Agnès Godard was asked whether her consistent collaboration with Denis risked becoming too routine, Godard replied: “We started out at the same time. Between us there is a complicity and a strange passionate relationship, an intimacy that is centred on the cinema.” Denis echoes this intensity: “It’s very idealistic. When you nourish one another it can work, but it’s like being in a couple. It can be very frustrating always working with the same people but it gives you a lot of security that allows you to explore.” It’s a relationship that is not without its downside, however: “It’s not always easy to work with them, because I’m always afraid to hurt them. When you know somebody you can’t use them as tools.

Actors

She enjoys her relationship with actors: “I loved the actors (in *Chocolat*), and they gave me a sense of fulfilment. This particular relationship, between director and actor, is neither admiration nor friendship, and it certainly is not seduction. It is pure love, a kind of energy...” She is captivated by her actors: “It’s hard for me to work with actors who are not companions” “Sometimes, when I go to the cinema, I’m so fascinated by a particular actor or actress that I have only one desire, and that’s to write for them and work with them.”

Denis has said that she doesn’t have a ‘concept’ for directing actors: “I see it more like choreography... Directing and acting exist in an organic relation similar to a dance between director and actors.”

Men

“I like writing stories about men not because I want to dominate them but because I like to observe and imagine them. A man is a different world and this masculinity interests me. French cinema is so full of talk - I couldn’t care less about these people talking about their lives. Godard said that in cinema there are women and guns and I agree completely. That’s to say, there’s sex and violence. Cinema functions through these even if one is highly intellectual.”

Women

Denis is quite ambivalent when she describes herself as a woman director, claiming that being a woman has not posed any difficulties for her in her career:

“

I never felt the problem of being a woman director. There was no special difficulty. If I don’t make a film one year, it’s because of me and not because I’m a woman and I don’t get all I need.” However when she talks of her time as an AD: “...even that job was not meant for women. So, at the very beginning, they would say, ‘Can you drive?’ I said yes. ‘Can you do this?’ I said yes. ‘Can you jump?’ I said yes. I would say yes to everything, and sometimes it wasn’t true, but it wasn’t that I was eager to prove that a woman could be as strong as a man, but I thought, ‘If I say no, then it’s finished.

“

I learned to drive trucks. Nobody asked me to, but I thought - I want to be able to do everything in the world. And I was - I am - lazy. I am afraid of spiders. But suddenly I decided: no more. Ten spiders? I would take them in my hand. Fifty mice? No problem! Suddenly, it was a sort of game for me. Not to be masculine. To be indestructible.

References and further reading

These programme notes are taken from a mixture of interviews and writings on Claire Denis. The majority of the source material was taken from Judith Mayne's Contemporary Film Directors book Claire Denis (University of Illinois Press, 2005), an excellent study of Denis' career and films.

Quotes have been taken from a variety of interviews, all viewable online:

'Claire Denis on her new film, 35 Shots of Rum,' Kira Cochrane,
The Guardian, 3 July 2009
<http://bit.ly/a32Nz7>

'Desire is Violence,' Chris Darke,
Sight & Sound Magazine, July 2000
<http://bit.ly/9sIV7M>

'Claire Denis interview: Colonial observations,' Mark A. Reid,
Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media, March 1996
<http://bit.ly/9CaRhJ>

'Spectacularly intimate: an interview with Claire Denis,' Kevin Lee,
The Auteurs, April 2009
<http://bit.ly/9qS4NW>

'Claire Denis: An Interview,' Aime Ancian,
Sofa, Issue 17
<http://bit.ly/d3hlfq>

'Claire Denis interviewed by Jonathan Romney,'
The Guardian/NFT Interview, 28 June 2000
<http://bit.ly/bjO0go>

'Claire Denis,' Samantha Dinning,
Senses of Cinema
<http://bit.ly/cDFdiK>

'Dancing reviews so much: An interview with Claire Denis,' Darren Hughes,
Senses of Cinema
<http://bit.ly/a0yoQ0>

'L'Intrus: An interview with Claire Denis,' Damon Smith,
Senses of Cinema
<http://bit.ly/dyMflw>

Towards Mathilde,
The New Zealand Film Archive
<http://bit.ly/bLR62M>

'On the nightshift: An interview with Claire Denis,' Adam Nayman,
Reverse Shot, Issue 26
<http://bit.ly/awMyqN>

A collection of 66 links to freely-accessible, mostly scholarly material on Denis' work
Film Studies For Free
<http://bit.ly/bdjS77>



**Intense Intimacy: The
Cinema of Claire Denis is
a Watershed retrospective
and will be touring at
the following venues:**

Watershed, Bristol

Sun 6 – Wed 30 June

Irish Film Institute, Dublin

Sun 6 – Wed 30 June

Filmhouse, Edinburgh

Sat 3 – Sun 25 July

Broadway, Nottingham

Sat 3 – Sat 31 July

Chapter, Cardiff

Sun 4 – Tue 27 July

GFT, Glasgow

Tue 6 – Tue 27 July

Arts Picture House, Cambridge

Wed 7 – Wed 14 July

Showroom, Sheffield

Wed 7 – Sat 31 July

Cornerhouse, Manchester

Tue 20 – Thu 29 July

For more information about the tour visit:
watershed.co.uk/clairedenis