

Claire Denis by Daniel Graham



Born in 1948 in Paris but raised in French colonial Africa where her Father worked as a Regional Administrator, Claire Denis' childhood was, by her own account, an itinerant one that may have later helped inform the remarkable sense of spatial and temporal displacement so prevalent in her work. Her father instilled in her an appreciation for geography that likely fostered an open mind towards peoples of other cultures and racial backgrounds, another of the director's ongoing thematic concerns. Her mother was a cinephile and would describe her favourite films to her, much the same way a novel might be recounted. An early love of adventure stories by writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad and Jack London gave way to a later attraction to the works of Jim Thompson and William Faulkner, who left a long-lasting impression on Denis.

A brief spell studying economics and an internship at a television station was followed by entry into France's prestigious film school IDHEC (now known as FEMIS). Graduation in 1972 left Denis in a 'zombie-like' state, but

fortuitously she was given the chance to work for Jacques Rivette, the only director of the New Wave she held in high esteem. Despite her disinterest in pursuing a career and being possessed of a strongly individualistic temperament, Denis went on to spend several years working for directors as diverse as Jean-François Stévenin, Costa-Gavras and Wim Wenders. By 1988 Claire Denis was well and truly ready to embark on her own career as a feature film director.

1988 saw the release in France of Catherine Breillat's *36 Fillette*, Luc Besson's *The Big Blue* and Bruno Nuytten's *Camille Claudel*, as good a barometer of public taste at that time as any. It also marked the appearance of Claire Denis' first feature, *Chocolat*, which recounted her experiences growing up in French colonial Africa. It was a remarkable debut by any standard. Free of the usual uncertain sense of editing, it felt, looked and sounded like the work of a fully matured artist.

Chocolat is the story of a white French family living in Cameroon around the late 1950s, only a few years before the country gained independence. Marc Dalens (François Cluzet) is a Regional Administrator whose travelling keeps him away from home and his wife, the beautiful but bored Aimée (Giulia Boschi). The story's narrator is their aptly named young daughter, France. When not barking orders at the various members of staff, Aimée fills her days with curious interludes between her and the striking Protée, the family servant, played with brimming intensity by Denis regular Isaach De Bankolé. These often threaten to become something more perilous than mere verbal exchange. Instead, Protée develops a more profound friendship with the young girl. Into this delicate mix of familial estrangement, sexual frustration, class structure, the shifting



Chocolat

state of race relations, a fading colonialism and geographical extremity comes an errant planeload of obtuse outsiders, both French and English, whose presence soon peels away the veneer that holds the Dalens family together. *Chocolat* is a highly assured, complex work, whose modesty nevertheless announced the arrival of a major new voice in cinema.

A Decade of Discovery

Denis followed the critical and commercial success of *Chocolat* with the 1989 documentary *Man No Run*, about the Cameroonian group, *Les Têtes Brulées*, who play a contemporary version of the ancient *Bikutsi* music; a uniquely hybrid form that made them stars in their own country and that brought them considerable success in France, where Denis first approached them about a film.

The 1990s proved an eclectic and progressive decade for Denis, as she worked in both cinema and television, including an episode



No Fear, No Die

of Cinema, de notre temps, entitled Jacques Rivette – *Le veilleur*. It was a conversational piece between Denis and co-director and interviewer Serge Daney and the French master, who discussed his life and career. Also in 1990, Denis released her second feature, *No Fear, No Die* (*S'en fout la mort*), which starred Jean-Claude Brialy, Solveig Dommartin and Isaach De Bankolé. The film took an unflinching look at the desperate measures a lack of money and, worse, a lack of hope, can bring about in people. It demonstrated Denis' growing confidence with actors of significantly varied backgrounds. The following year, she directed the short film *Keep It For Yourself* and took part in a portmanteau film, *Control l'oubli*, which was designed to act as an 'artists petition' to free a prominent figure of the Irian Jaya Separatist Movement, Thomas Wanggai.



I Can't Sleep

In 1994's *I Can't Sleep* (*J'ai pas sommeil*), a young Lithuanian woman, played by another Denis regular Yekaterina Golubeva, arrives in Paris to look for work and crashes with a distant relative. She encounters some dyed-in-the-wool bigotry, male chauvinism and police harassment before Denis segues into a parallel story of a young, gay, black man whose unspecified criminal associations eventually split asunder his already precarious existence. Rarely seen in the UK, *I Can't Sleep* seems, with hindsight, to be the best example of Denis' early career of the human landscape she would explore in years to come.

That same year, Claire Denis teamed up with actress Anne Wiazemsky, whom Robert Bresson had discovered many years earlier, to co-write *U.S. Go Home*, an episode from the television series *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge...*. Commissioned by ARTE, *U.S. Go Home* was a compendium film in which ten filmmakers were asked to direct a film dealing with their youth. There were two stipulations, that a party scene be included and that reference be made to music that had a particularly strong impact upon them. Denis successfully took a fairly predictable set of ideas and turned them into something more personal and complex, yet with a real sense of the impermanence that marks one's teenage years. Future Denis regulars Grégoire Colin and Vincent Gallo were on hand to offer their compelling brand of physicality.

Nice, Very Nice followed in 1995, which was another episode from a television series in France, called *A propos de Nice, la suite*. Her fellow directors included Costa-Gavras, Abbas Kiarostami and Catherine Breillat. Made with Jean Vigo very much in mind, a reference made apparent in the series title, *Nice, Very Nice* took a semi-fictional look at modern life on the French Côte d'Azur. Again, Denis' episode fared well alongside her colleagues' instalments. Evident too was Denis' unfailing humanity and love of people, and her understanding of human nature, which overrides racial, cultural and gender backgrounds.

Nenette et Boni is set in the melting pot of Marseilles. nineteen-year-old hoodlum Boniface Pavone (Grégoire Colin) shows little concern for the lives of those around him nor indeed for his own future. Having inherited his late mother's flat, he passes his time with cruel and unusual pursuits, surely a warning sign to anyone bothered enough to care. When his younger sister Nenette (Alice Houri), herself no angel, enters the scene, things only become more complicated until 'Boni', as he is known, takes a more active interest in his sibling's future and by consequence his own. *Nenette et Boni* uses the familiar coming-of-age framework to

deliver the more substantial and complex ideas of repressed emotion and the inability to come to terms with one's own desires, no matter how destructive they are. Distinguished by a keen eye for casting and an impartial camera that refuses to take sides, *Nenette et Boni* also marked the beginning of Denis' collaboration with *The Tindersticks* whose genre-defying music would go on to make such an important contribution to her films, reaching its apotheosis in *The Intruder*. Rarely has a filmmaker employed music in such an empathetic and inspired way and avoided cliché so assiduously. It seemed a match made in heaven.



Beau Travail

Beau Travail is one of the most convincing arguments for blurring the lines between cinema and other art forms. Inspired by Herman Melville's unfinished novella, *Billy Budd*, Denis' film could be described, at its most basic, as a power struggle within a small band of French Foreign Legion troops. Starring Denis Lavant and the charismatic Michel Subor (*Le Petit Soldat*), *Beau Travail* proves that 'beauty' just by itself can achieve profundity without textual justification. The cinematography of Denis regular Agnès Godard is ravishing and she must be counted as Denis' most significant ongoing collaborator, alongside editor Nelly Quettier.

Galoup (Denis Lavant) spends his days in idle retreat in a small flat in Marseilles reflecting on his past in the French Foreign Legion. As Sergeant of a small troop of soldiers stationed in the remote deserts of Djibouti, Galoup's primary task is to maintain discipline

amongst his men. However, his feelings for a new recruit, the fine-featured young Sentain (Grégoire Colin), don't go unnoticed. Even their commanding officer, Bruno Forrestier (Michel Subor), harbours feelings for the young man, adding to the already palpable sense of tension set amidst the stunning geographical extremity of Djibouti.

For the casual viewer, *Beau Travail* may appear stunning but confusing. What Denis has achieved, however, is a film that cannot be approached or understood in a conventional way. In its perfect blend of image and sound, interpreting the narrative becomes redundant. It is a film whose sensuousness, above all else, is important. It is an impressive stylistic advance within Denis' work and contemporary European cinema in general.

2001's *Trouble Every Day* was another of Denis' many Parisian-based films that dealt non-tangentially with a set of strained relationships that intersect, only to suddenly part ways again. Here she tackles the idea of lives unconsciously affecting each other with a naturalness that has often escaped other filmmakers. A weakness throughout is Vincent Gallo, who fails to convince at any point, especially when he 'talks science' with a colleague. Denis' grasp of the real and the imagined falls short on this occasion whenever Gallo is on screen. An acquired taste, perhaps, but one that escaped this writer's palate.

Trouble Every Day sees a young American couple visit Paris on their honeymoon. Shane (Vincent Gallo) is a scientist whose pursuit of cannibalism carries him off the traditional honeymooners' path in search of old friend Léo (Alex Descas), another character with a taste for the macabre. Unable to grasp the true nature of his sickness, Shane seems doomed from the outset, not helped by the childlike demeanour of his new bride (Tricia Vessey). Meanwhile, Léo's wife Coré (Beatrice Dalle) notches up more than a few victims. A not entirely successful genre-bending experiment, *Trouble Every Day* still looks and feels utterly



Trouble Every Day

unique and daring when placed alongside the efforts of most other filmmakers who have attempted a similar approach. Why Denis chose the vampire film remains obscure, but the film succeeds at the very least on the level of sheer thematic boldness and originality, consistent with her body of work at large.

In 2004, Denis directed *Vendredi Soir*, which came about in an uncannily similar way to the film's plot. Denis and Emmanuèle Bernheim, author of the novel, were working on another film together when one day, over a glass of wine in a café, Denis proposed they drop the project and try something else. When Bernheim asked Denis what it was that she really wanted to work on, her synopsis breakdown was practically identical to the novel Bernheim had written.

Any adaptation of a novel is by definition subject to radical change and it was the absence of the novel's 'voiceover' and any other expository device that imbued the film with its mystery and near-magical ability to move the receptive viewer to a place both strange and beautiful. The sparsity of dialogue wasn't the film's only daring choice. Its lead was Valérie Lemercier, an actress better known for her comedic roles such as the 1993 mega-hit *Les Visiteurs*. Added to this, her unconventional beauty was considered 'intriguing' by the producers – a poorly veiled insult and one that had a profound effect on the actress. Yet the performance she produced

is one of the most sensual and intoxicating in recent memory, along with the intensity and charisma of leading man Vincent Lindon. The reservoir of unspoken emotion that is ready to boil over by the final frame is a testament to the filmmaker's virtuosity with even the slightest of narrative threads.

Vendredi Soir takes place over the course of one night in Paris amidst the worst traffic jam in memory. Laure (Valérie Lemercier) is in a state of flux as she packs up all her belongings to move in with her lover. Stuck in an impossible gridlock that offers her a strange sense of security and privacy, she meets handsome stranger Jean (Vincent Lindon) with whom she enters into an ill-considered, fly-by-night love affair. Overtaken by emotion, Laure lets events overtake her, unaware of where they might lead her.



Vendredi Soir

One of the qualities of a great artist who endures is unpredictability. Not through a calculated approach to the ever-changing marketplace but through their own inability to know how they will feel in the future. In 2004, two years after her contribution to the compendium film *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello*, Denis embarked on her most ambitious film to date, *The Intruder* (*L'Intrus*). Its primary source of inspiration were the memoirs of Jean-Luc Nancy, which provide the film with its title and plot. In collaboration with Jean-Pol Fargeau, Denis' screenplay also borrowed freely from the diaries of painter Paul Gauguin and novelist Robert Louis Stevenson. The



The Intruder

Intruder (2004) tells the tale of the aging Louis Trebor (Michel Subor), a 'man's man', who takes off on a global search for a new heart and to track down his long lost son. Living a solitary existence amongst the forests of the Swiss/Franco border, Trebor embarks upon a part-imagined, part-experienced journey to the South Pacific, via Geneva, where he buys a new watch, and Pusan, in South Korea, where he buys a new heart. The epic voyage he takes acts as a physical and emotional rebirth for a man whose thoughts and feelings remain ambiguous throughout.

An initial viewing of *The Intruder* will most likely perplex, frustrate and even infuriate. Yet a second viewing makes complete sense of events, not in a textual, analytical way, but by trusting one's own intuition and relinquishing the need to 'understand'. Like *Beau Travail*, the experience is utterly unique. The stunning score by Stuart Staples of *The Tindersticks* plays no small part in this transformational effect. Somewhat reminiscent of the ECM 'sound', Staples' music is both ethereal and propulsive and evokes a mood of temporal awareness, intuitive thought without end. An exact musical correlative of the film, in fact.

2005's *Vers Mathilde* is an intimate documentary about French choreographer Mathilde Monnier, who is the director of the Centre Chorégraphique National de Montpellier Languedoc-Roussillon, in the South East of France. The empathy between Denis and Monnier is unmistakable, especially given Denis' own understanding of dance and choreography. Sadly its very limited theatrical

distribution has prevented it from reaching a wider audience. The greater the understanding one has of Denis' work, the richer the reward to be found here when observing Monnier at work. It comes as something of a surprise that Denis hasn't made more documentaries about like-minded artists given her intuitive understanding of Monnier's work.



35 Shots of Rum

Denis effortlessly reverted to a more traditional form of storytelling in 2008 with *35 Shots of Rum* (*35 Rhum*). It centres on the relationship between Lionel, a Parisian train driver, and his young student daughter, Joséphine. Lionel makes just enough money to sustain a spartan yet comfortable existence while his bright young daughter studies social sciences, hoping one day to make a better life for herself. When a recently retired colleague of Lionel's takes his own life, he is forced to reassess the things that matter most to him and to finally come to terms with the death of his wife. He's also keen to see Joséphine seek her independence, as hard as this will be for him in her absence. Their charming neighbour Noé (Grégoire Colin) courts Joséphine but her attention lies elsewhere, while their other neighbour Gabrielle (Nicole Dogu ) has eyes for the sullen but handsome Lionel.

35 Shots of Rum was proof positive of Denis' total mastery and confidence behind the camera. Tellingly, she has described herself as a fragile person in normal life, when not directing, but that directing a film makes her strong. One could hardly guess such a disparity exists given the profound humanity and

assurance evident in this film. Again, Denis' artistry elevates an essentially mundane set of circumstances to the realm of transcendent realism; a realistic style that captures and distils feelings well beyond the 'everyday', using the simplest of means. However, *35 Shots of Rum* is far from pretentious. It is a direct film that bravely never succumbs to waving the 'race' flag despite its unmistakable milieu. Newcomer Mati Diop and Denis regular Alex Descas both turn in impressively naturalistic performances, full of unforced humanity and hope amidst the ceaseless grind of working-class life that is modern-day existence for the large majority of the world's population.



35 Shots of Rum

Claire Denis returned to the African continent in 2009, with *White Material*. Isabelle Huppert plays Maria, a coffee plantation owner struggling in the face of an impending coup, with increasingly resentful workers and an idle teenage son whose ominous silence speaks volumes about the privileged environment in which they live. The pairing of France's most audacious actress and its most innovative film director is enough to grab one's attention, but this is neither a tepid vehicle for a great actress or a poorly conceived mismatch of talent. Instead we have another fresh chapter in the Claire Denis story. If it feels like similar territory, then this may be a signal that Denis will once again defy expectation and move in a new or different direction. When compared to the work of most other contemporary directors, many of whom are more highly regarded, *White Material* stands out as a persuasive reminder of Denis' singular

**White Material**

strength of vision and profound understanding of human beings in all their weakness and strength, beauty of spirit and ugliness of heart.

In response to the question of the formation of her distinctive style already evident in her debut film some 22 years ago, Denis has this to say: 'I knew even before I was working on my first film... you can invent a style in your mind but what happens on set is what is in [the film]. For the style is not something I can choose on the set. It's the way the script is written. It's already a choice of lens I can say. It's already a choice of point of view in the script. So therefore if suddenly on the set I thought I was attracted to choose a style or whatever I would be afraid. I would be afraid to betray the script, to betray

what I believe in. As soon as I start editing with the editor it shows as a natural thing... like the pure nature of the film.'

Despite the undoubted artistry of Claire Denis' work, any suggestion to this effect is, in true modesty, rebuked by the filmmaker, who is only too aware of the fragile, inter-dependent nature of filmmaking: 'It's a sort of painful situation because cinema is not known for artists. I don't take myself for an artist. I try to make a film as honestly as I can... I don't try to translate my personal story but I try to say something about the world. Therefore I think if I manage to make a film with a little budget, a small budget, to not spend too much money and to have a producer who understands me, who believes me, an actor who can touch you, I think I am still very lucky.'

DANIEL GRAHAM is a freelance film critic who has written for various publications and interviewed many filmmakers and practitioners. He has also written and directed eight short films that have played at film festivals throughout the UK and France.

Claire Denis filmography

[feature film directing credits only]

1988

CHOCOLAT

Script: Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photography: Robert Alazraki. Production Design: Thierry Flamand. Editing: Monica Coleman, Claudine Merlin and Sylvie Quester. Music: Abdullah Ibrahim. Players: Isaach De Bankolé (Protée), Giulia Boschi (Aimée Dalens), François Cluzet (Marc Dalens), Jean-Claude Adelin (Luc), Laurent Arnal (Machinard), Jean Bediebe (Prosper), Jean-Quentin Châtelain (Courbassol), Emmanuelle Chauvet (Mireille Machinard), Kenneth

Cranham (Boothby), Jacques Denis (Joseph Delpich), Cécile Ducasse (France enfant), Clementine Essono (Marie-Jeanne), Didier Flamand (Capt. Védrine), Essindi Mindja (Blaise). Produced by Alain Belmondo, Gérard Crosnier. 105 mins

1990

S'EN FOUT LA MORT (No Fear, No Die)

Script: Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photography: Pascal Marti. Production Design: Jean-Jacques Caziot. Editing: Dominique Auvray. Music: Abdullah Ibrahim. Players: Isaach De Bankolé (Dah), Alex Descas (Jocelyn), Solveig Dommartin (Toni), Christopher

Buchholz (Michel), Jean-Claude Brialy (Pierre Ardennes), Christa Lang (Toni's Mother), Gilbert Felmar (TiEmile), Daniel Bellus (Henri), François Oloa Biloa (François), Pipo Sarguera (Pipo), Alain Banicles (Inspector), Valérie Monnet (The Girl). Produced by Francis Boespflug, Philippe Carcassonne. 90 mins

1994

J'AI PAS SOMMEIL (I Can't Sleep)

Script: Claire Denis. Photography: Agnès Godard. Production Design: Arnaud de Moleron and Thierry Flamand. Editing: Nelly Quettier. Music: Jean-Louis Murat, John Pattison. Players: Yekaterina Golubeva (Daiga), Richard Courcet

(Camille), *Vincent Dupont* (Raphael), *Laurent Gréville* (le docteur), *Alex Descas* (Theo), *Irina Grjebina* (Mina), *Tolsty* (Ossip), *Line Renaud* (Ninon), *Béatrice Dalle* (Mona), *Sophie Simon* (Alice), *Patrick Grandperret* (Abel). *Produced by Bruno Pésery*. 110 mins

1996

NÉNETTE ET BONI

Script: Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. *Photography: Pascal Marti*. *Production Design: Arnaud de Moleron*. *Editing: Yann Dedet*. *Music: Tindersticks*. *Players: Grégoire Colin* (Boni), *Alice Houry* (Nénette), *Jacques Nolot* (Monsieur Luminaire), *Valeria Bruni Tedeschi* (Baker's wife), *Vincent Gallo* (Vincenzo Brown), *Malek Brahimi* (Malek), *Gérard Meylan* (Uncle), *Sébastien Pons* (Boni's friend), *Mounir Aïssa* (Boni's friend), *Christophe Carmona* (Boni's friend), *Djellali El'Ouzeri* (Boni's friend), *Alex Descas* (Le gynécologue), *Jamila Farah* (Midwife), *Agnes Regolo* (Radiologist), *Pepette* (L'assistante sociale). *Produced by Georges Benayoun*. 103 mins

1999

BEAU TRAVAIL

Script: Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. *Photography: Agnès Godard*. *Production Design: Arnaud de Moleron*. *Editing: Nelly Quettier*. *Music: Charles Henri de Pierrefeu, Eran Zur*. *Players: Denis Lavant* (Galoup), *Michel Subor* (Commander Bruno Forestier), *Grégoire Colin* (Gilles Sentain), *Richard Courcet* (Legionnaire), *Nicholas Duvauchelle* (Legionnaire), *Adiatou Massudi* (Legionnaire), *Mickaël Ravovski* (Legionnaire), *Dan Herzberg* (Legionnaire), *Giuseppe Molino* (Legionnaire), *Marta Tafesse Kassa* (Young Woman), *Gianfranco Poddighe* (Legionnaire), *Marc Veh* (Legionnaire), *Thong Duy Nguyen*

(Legionnaire), *Jean-Yves Vivet* (Legionnaire), *Bernardo Montet* (Legionnaire), *Dimitri Tsiapkis* (Legionnaire), *Djamel Zemali* (Legionnaire), *Abdelkader Bouti* (Legionnaire). *Produced by Patrick Grandperret*. 93 mins

2001

TROUBLE EVERY DAY

Script: Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. *Photography: Agnès Godard*. *Production Design: Arnaud de Moleron*. *Editing: Nelly Quettier*. *Music: Tindersticks*. *Players: Vincent Gallo* (Shane), *Tricia Vessey* (June), *Béatrice Dalle* (Coré), *Alex Descas* (Léo), *Florence Loiret* (Christelle), *Nicholas Duvauchelle* (Erwan), *Raphaël Neal* (Ludo), *José Garcia* (Choart), *Hélène Lapiower* (Malécot), *Marilu Marini* (Friessen), *Aurore Clément* (Jeanne). *Produced by Georges Banayoun, Philippe Liégeois, Jean-Michel Rey*. 101 mins

2002

VENDREDI SOIR (Friday Night)

Script: Emmenuèle Bernheim. *Photography: Agnès Godard*. *Production Design: Katia Wyszokop*. *Editing: Nelly Quettier*. *Music: Dickon Hinchliffe*. *Players: Valérie Lemerrier* (Laure), *Vincent Lindon* (Jean), *Hélène de Saint-Père* (Marie). *Produced by Bruno Pésery*. 90 mins

2004

L'INTRUS (The Intruder)

Script: Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. *Photography: Agnès Godard*. *Production Design: Arnaud de Moleron*. *Editing: Nelly Quettier*. *Music: S.A. Staples*. *Players: Michel Subor* (Louis Trebor), *Grégoire Colin* (Sidney), *Yekaterina Golubeva* (Young Russian woman), *Bambou* (Pharmacist), *Florence Loiret* (Antoinette), *Lolita Chammah* (The Wild Woman), *Alex Descas* (The Priest), *Dong-ho Kim* (Ship owner), *Henri Tetaïnanuarii* (Henri), *Jean-Marc Teriipaia* (Tony), *Anna*

Tetuaveroa (The Mother), *Béatrice Dalle* (Queen of the Northern Hemisphere). *Produced by Humbert Balsan*. 130 mins

2008

35 RHUMS (35 Shots of Rum)

Script: Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. *Photography: Agnès Godard*. *Production Design: Arnaud de Moleron*. *Editing: Guy Lecorne*. *Music: Tindersticks*. *Players: Alex Descas* (Lionel), *Mati Diop* (Joséphine), *Nicole Dogue* (Gabrielle), *Grégoire Colin* (Noé), *Jean-Christophe Folly* (Ruben), *Djédjé Apali* (Martial), *Eriq Ebouaney* (Blanchard), *Ingrid Caven* (La tante allemande), *Julieth Mars Toussaint* (René), *Mary Pie* (Lina). *Produced by Bruno Pésery*. 100 mins

2009

WHITE MATERIAL

Script: Claire Denis, Marie N'Diaye. *Photography: Yves Cape*. *Production Design: Abiassi Sanit-Père*. *Editing: Guy Lecorne*. *Music: Stuart Staples*. *Players: Isabelle Huppert* (Maria), *Isaac De Bankolé* (The Boxer), *Christophe Lambert* (André Vial), *Nicholas Duvauchelle* (Manuel Vial), *William Nadylam* (Chérif), *Adèle Ado* (Lucie), *Ali Barkai* (Jeep), *Daniel Tchangan* (José), *Michel Subor* (Henri Vial). *Produced by Pascal Cauchetaux*. 100 mins

