Directed by Claire Denis
Written by Claire Denis, Marie N'Diaye, Lucie Borleteau
Produced by Pascal Caucheteux
Original Music by Stuart Staples
Cinematography by Yves Cape
Film Editing by Guy Lecorne
Visual Effects by Elodie Glain
Weapons by Frédéric Cauvy

Isabelle Huppert…Maria Vial
Christopher Lambert…André Vial
Nicolas Duvauchelle…Manuel Vial
William Nadylam…Chérif, le maire
Michel Subor…Henri Vial, le propriétaire
Isaach De Bankolé…Le Boxeur
Adèle Ado…Lucie, la femme d'André
Ali Barkai…Jeep, le chef des enfants rebelles
Jean-Marie Ahanda
Martin Poulive
Patrice Eya
Serge Mong
Mama Njouam
Thomas Dumerchez
Christine-Ange Tatah
Suzanne Ayuck
Daniel Tchangang…José


From the European Graduate School website:

Claire Denis (b. April 21, 1948, Paris) is a Paris-based filmmaker and one of the major artistic voices of contemporary French cinema. After a disappointing experience of studying economics, Claire Denis enrolled in the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (now École Nationale Supérieure des Métiers de l’Image et du Son) where she graduated in 1971. At the beginning of her film career, she worked as an assistant director to Dušan Makavejev, Costa Gavras, Jacques Rivette, Jim Jarmusch and Wim Wenders. Claire Denis made her film debut in 1988 with Chocolat, a luminous depiction of malaise of the post-colonial world.

Claire Denis has developed a highly individualistic style, favoring visual and sound elements over dialogue, and her editing technique has been compared to jazz improvisation for its rhythmic quality. At the same time, she refuses the conformity to narrative and structures of classical cinema, as well as psychological realism and scenic continuity, sometimes blurring the border between dreams and reality. Her films are made on the basis of nonsubjective memories and intertextual references to literature and other films. On the level of content, Claire Denis' films show deep affection and solidarity with marginalized characters usually absent from mainstream cinema (immigrants, exiles, alienated individuals, sexual transgressives), simultaneously questioning prejudices of the dominant white European culture and its myth of progress. One of the main characters in her films became the accompanying music, her particular use of pop songs and musical themes created in collaboration with, most often, Abdullah Ibrahim and British cult group Tindersticks. Claire Denis is also considered to be one of the representatives of the New French Extremity, a term coined by James Quandt to designate transgressive films made by French directors at the turn of the 21st century.

Born in Paris, Claire Denis spent her childhood and formative years traveling across Africa, due to the wish of her father, a colonial administrator, to teach his children the importance of geography. This experience was a basis for her interest in national identity and the legacy of French colonialism, which was translated
into her first film Chocolat, a non-biographical account of post-colonialism. The film starts with a white French woman in her late twenties, France, returning to Cameroon to visit her childhood home. During a car ride she is offered by two strangers, Mungo Park and his son, the film goes back to her childhood in the colonial outpost. Here, we are introduced to Protée, an African native patiently ministering to demands of her and her parents, as well as their ill-mannered guests from the continent. The film relies on the visual rather than the verbal to explain interracial tensions and conflicts, simultaneously showing the intermingled nature of power relations and relations of desire. The house depicted is charged with desire and sexual yearning, while the complicity of relations becomes clear through the exposure of the process of internalization of inferiority the inhabitants of former colonies were affected by. The film ends with Mungo's failed attempt to read the future from France's palm with burn scars, as well as his rejection to have a drink with her, following the pattern of interracial relations established in the flashback. According to this ending, Claire Denis seems to suggest that not much has changed in Cameroon.

After her debut, Claire Denis made a documentary about a Cameroon band Les Têtes Brulées on their first tour in France, entitled Man No Run (1989). She continued to explore post-colonial attitudes in the modern metropolis in her next feature, S’en fout la mort / No Fear, No Die (1990). This claustrophobic and grainy film, tells a story about two men, one from Benin and one from Caribbean, living on the margins of French society. They become involved in an illegal cock-fighting ring, and the experience depicted is one of cultural displacement and racial conflict. The same themes Denis further explored in J'ai Pas Sommeil / I Can't Sleep (1994), introducing the cultural as well as familial tensions at work among various immigrants, in the moment when their fates become additionally effected by a serial killer.

Claire Denis deepened her discussion on the topic of family relations in Nénette et Boni / Nenette and Boni (1996), a film about a lovesorn brother and his pregnant teenage sister after the suicide of their mother. This coming-of-age drama received a vast international reception and become one of Claire Denis' most successful works. Nevertheless, it was her next film Beau Travail / Good Work (1998) that brought her international praise, based loosely on Herman Melville's novella Billy Budd, Sailor. The story focuses on French legionnaires stationed in Djibouti, following their male-bonding routines and codes of repression in a homosocial militarized environment. The height of eroticism is to be seen in the extremely antagonistic relationship between a sergeant Galoup and a new legionnaire recruit Gilles. The film's sensual focus is fixed upon the male body and its movements and gestures, and many critics underlined Claire Denis' talent in replacing Melville's verbosity with a silence that speaks more than words.

In 2001, Claire Denis shocked Cannes audiences with her Trouble Every Day, her elaboration of violent poetics of desire, with Vincent Gallo and Beatrice Dalle as carriers of a blood-hungry virus released by erotic stimulation. We follow a routine of a young American couple spending their honeymoon in Paris, with the husband secretly on trial in a new experiment of an unorthodox doctor. Although considered to be a film in which Claire Denis came closest to making a horror film, it simultaneously blurred the border between high and low genres. The scenes of sexual cannibalism examine the contemporary violence of desire as well as the existing anxieties directed toward scientific inquiry and its ethics.

With her Vendredi soir / Friday Night (2002), Claire Denis will tell a different story about intimate relation between two strangers who met during a public-transport strike. A man and a woman engage in a passionate one-night stand, where the communication between the two happens through a mere glance. The result is a sensual, ravishing visual experience told through a series of nonvoyeristic images of their bodies.

L' Intrus / The Intruder (2004) was nominated for a Golden Lion at the 2004 Venice Film Festival and represents, according to many, the most mysterious and invigorating work Claire Denis had made. The film takes inspiration from R.L. Stevenson, Paul Gauguin's paintings, as well as a memoir by French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, from whom she borrowed the title and the motif of heart transplant. Namely, the story follows an enigmatic man in his late sixties traveling in the South Seas in an attempt to find a son he never met and a new heart. Claire Denis gives us a poetic, dreamlike experience shared with this 'heartless' man and his new equally mysterious Russian woman, during their search for signs of home in the borderlands inhabited by aliens and natives, intruders and guests. According to Claire Denis, the inspiration for the story of her most recent film, 35 rhums / 35 Shots of Rum (2008) came from the relationship her mother had with her own Brazilian father, while on its formal level represents an homage to the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. The film takes place during a period when a widowed father and his daughter are supposed to start a new life, during her coming of age and becoming able to start her own family. The film seems to be in flow, relying mostly on faces and bodies to depict feelings impossible to verbalize. Its focus is on the integrity of a small family of two, surrounded by the network of others whining to get in. In its crucial moment, the solution comes through the decision to act instead of being a passive participant in the flow, the agency taken by the daughter.

Claire Denis' latest film, Matériel Blanc / White Material (2009), scripted by the novelist Marie NDiaye, takes place in present-day Cameroon. It depicts the members of a white family surrounded by unrest and rebellion, trying to save their coffee plantation and seemingly blind to the new constellation of power established in the outside world.

Andrew Hussey: “Claire Denis: ‘For me, filmmaking is a journey into the impossible.’” The Observer, 3 July 2010

Since her 1988 debut Chocolat, Claire Denis has established herself as one of France's most respected film directors, with a wide-ranging body of work and a taste for danger. Her latest film, White Material, which stars Isabelle Huppert, draws again upon her colonial African
childhood, and its violence has sparked controversy in the French press. Not that she cares…

One of the lingering charms of the Left Bank of Paris in the 21st century is that, although much of the area has long since surrendered to chain stores and fast-food joints, the streets between Boulevard Saint-Michel and rue Mouffetard are still dotted with fleapit cinemas with names such as L'Accattone, Studio Galande and Le Champo. On any given afternoon – to take a random sample from the programmes on offer in these places last week – you can take in Battleship Potemkin, a Buñuel retrospective, a lesser-known Fellini, or Nicholas Ray's Johnny Guitar (an obscure western from 1954 that is incomprehensibly revered by all French true believers in the art of cinema). Most amazing of all is that these picture-houses are almost always packed, even on a sunny Monday afternoon in June (which is when I took the sample). For French film-buffs these are historic, even sacred sites. Hollywood may be the capital of the film world, but no one takes their movies more seriously than Parisians.

Nowhere is this more true than in the cafe of the Cinéma du Panthéon, one of the most important temples for Parisian cinéphiles. Appropriately enough, this is where I meet up with the film director Claire Denis. For the past decade or so, Denis has regularly been hailed as one of the leading French directors of her generation. This is mainly because, as her track record demonstrates, she is fearless. She does not shy away from difficult subjects – including sex, cannibalism, incest, politics, murder, race, sometimes all of them at the same time. It is this bravery that has inspired many critics to hail her as not only one of the most technically accomplished directors of recent years, but also one of the leading chroniclers of 21st-century France in all its postcolonial complexity. She has even recently been noted by at least one serious critic as "one of the greatest film-makers working today". Our meeting is to discuss her latest movie, White Material – a fairly big-budget production starring Isabelle Huppert and Christopher Lambert, which has just opened in the UK. The cafe is packed with young people drinking coffee and discussing, with touchng Gallic intensity, film theory, Marxism and Jean-Luc Godard (his latest film has just been screened in the neighbouring cinema). Claire Denis is amused by this spectacle and sympathetic to it but insists that this is really not her world. "I am not an intellectual like these youngsters," she says, looking around. "I never was. I am not at all interested in theories about cinema. I am only interested in images and people and sound. I am really a very simple person."

This much is obviously untrue. The sheer range of Denis's accomplishments suggests that, at the very least, this is a woman who thinks a lot about the world and her place in it. She married at 19, got divorced and has no children. Her early film career, when she worked as an assistant on film sets, was partly financed by her husband's money. Apart from this, she gives little away about her personal life and cultivates an austere public image. In photographs she is often gaunt and severe-looking, a look which has led to speculation over her sexuality. In the flesh, however, at 62 years old, she dresses sexily in a mini-skirt, black tights and leather boots, though her face is stern, at least for now. At first sight she is a mildly intimidating cross between Barbara Windsor and Simone de Beauvoir.

Denis first came to international prominence in 1988 with the film Chocolat, the story of a little French girl growing up in a remote colonial outpost in central Africa. The focus of the tale is on the little girl's complicated friendship with an older black servant. The film was praised as announcing a new maturity in French cinema, reflecting the complicated sexual and racial tensions at the core of the relations between the coloniser and the colonised. Chocolat was nominated for a César, the French equivalent of an Oscar.

Since then, Denis has made nine feature-length films that have established her as a key figure in world cinema. In some ways, Chocolat has been her most conventional work. Among the most critically acclaimed of her other films are S’en fout la mort (No Fear, No Die, 1990), a film about two Africans involved in cock-fighting, J'ai pas sommeil (I Can't Sleep, 1994), a study of a black serial killer adrift in Paris that was based on a notorious real-life case, Beau Travail (Good Work, 1999), a homoerotic reworking of Melville's Billy Budd set among foreign legionnaires in the Algerian desert, and 35 rhums (2008), a tale of working-class family life in multi-ethnic Paris. One of her most recent projects was L'intrus (The Intruder), a film about the heart transplant of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy was a friend of Jacques Derrida and is a sophisticated critic of Hegel and postmodernity, and hardly the kind of "ordinary person" that you might find in the films of Claire Denis.

When I ask Denis what brings together these disparate strands, her response is characteristically oblique: "I suppose I am interested in the variety of human life – how people live. I am most interested in individuals and how they respond to challenges or to difficulties, or just to each other. I am curious about people. So that's why I do a lot of different things. The cinema should be human and be part of people's lives; it should focus on ordinary existences in sometimes extraordinary situations and places. That is what really motivates me."

There is probably no such thing as a typical film by Claire Denis, but White Material is consistent with this vision of the role of cinema. It is set in an unnamed African country about to collapse into civil war. This is a blasted, haunted landscape, populated by demonic child soldiers and a shadowy guerrilla army that slaughters in the bush or under the cover of night. From the opening sequences on, everyone we meet, from the local mayor to farmers and shopkeepers, is visibly terrified.

Against this background Maria Vial, a French coffee farmer, struggles to save her crop as her workers abandon her in the weeks leading up to the harvest. This role is played with steely magnificence by Isabelle Huppert, who brings to it a combination of strength and fragility. Maria feels that she belongs in Africa because she works the land, but she is alone, vulnerable and white in a country where the majority population is black. This provides Denis with material for some brilliant visual motifs. Huppert is dressed in white for the early
part of the film and always shot against a darkening background. Her almost translucent features are photographed in close-up as she sweats and suffers.

On its release in France White Material was lauded as another Denis masterpiece by the serious critics from Le Monde to Les Inrockuptibles. Not all reviewers have been sympathetic, however. White Material contains long stretches of images that have no apparent narrative purpose. This is a recurring device in Denis's films and one which, when overused, can frustrate the viewer and it is probably why, despite her star-studded cast, Denis has yet to cross over into the middle-brow middle ground occupied by most ordinary French cinema-goers.

The most potentially damaging review, however, appeared in the pages of the magazine Marianne, known for its provocative style. Film critic Danièle Heymann applauded Denis as both "artistically superb" and "politically incorrect". What exactly did this mean? Was she suggesting that Denis was perhaps using her white characters to demonstrate the moral superiority of the whites over the "savage" blacks in Africa in a situation of crisis? Did she even mean that Denis was defending the rights of the white farmers in present-day Zimbabwe?

"Of course not," Denis says now, "but I do know Africa. It was where I was brought up after all and I understand something of how different from Europe it is. It is always much more dense than people think. But sometimes things are literally black and white. So I wanted to show in this film how being white in Africa gives you a special status, almost a kind of magical aura. It protects you from misery and starvation. But although it can protect you, it is dangerous too. This is what Maria has to learn. The danger for Maria is that she thinks she belongs in Africa because she is close to the land and the people. She cannot return to France because she thinks that it will weaken her. But she learns that she doesn't belong in Africa as much as she thinks. For many white people in Africa this is the reality."

Denis has stated publicly that she is an admirer of Frantz Fanon. Fanon was a psychiatrist from Martinique who detested French colonialism and worked for the Algerian side until his death in 1961. In his key books Les damnés de la terre (The Wretched of the Earth) and Peau noire, masques blancs (Black Skin, White Masks), Fanon argued that colonialism was a form of psychic violence that destroyed the identity of the colonised. As a response to this, Fanon advocated total rejection of European civilisation. Instead, the colonised must create a new culture, defined by force of arms if necessary. He called this "the will to be a nigger".

Denis read Fanon when she was about 14 and found his ideas devastating. What she found most humbling in his work was his analysis of the degrading effect of the shame and humiliation, which infect coloniser and colonised alike. "I understood that humiliation was the important feeling that people had in this relationship," she says, "and this is on both sides, black and white."

Claire Denis was born in Paris but spent her childhood in Africa, where her father worked for the French colonial administration. The family moved house every two years, mainly through the French colonies that would become Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Djibouti. Unusually for the 1950s, her father spoke several African languages and was in favour of independence for African nations. He was a personal friend of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, an intellectual and the first president of Ivory Coast. Denis loved Africa, felt it was home, and was traumatised when, at the age of 13, she and her sister were forced to go back to Paris, having contracted polio. She returned, aged 17, to finish her school studies in Senegal, but something had been broken.

What this childhood gave her above all, Denis tells me, was a sense of wonder. "When I came back to France I realised that I had seen things that other children had not seen – elephants, zebras, deserts. What other children dreamed about, I had actually seen with my own eyes." When Denis moved back to Paris in the late 1960s to pick up her formal studies she says that she never lost the memory of this hallucinatory landscape. She graduated in 1972 from the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC), the prestigious film institute in Paris. She then went on to work as an assistant with Jacques Rivette, Costa-Gavras, Jim Jarmusch and Wim Wenders.

"This is when I really fell in love with cinema," she says. "I began to love the whole process of organising the technology, the actors, and the team. For me, it is a total experience of art in action."

Denis co-wrote the script of White Material with Marie NDiaye, a 43-year-old novelist of Franco-Senegalese origin. NDiaye had her first novel published at the age of 17 and, in 2001, was awarded the Prix Femina for her novel Rosie Carpe. In 2009, she won the Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious literary prize in France, for her novel Trois puissantes femmes (Three Powerful Women). Given NDiaye's parallel interest in the French colonial experience and its aftermath, as well as her taste for novelty and experiment, this seemed the perfect artistic marriage. There were, however, rumours in the French press that all had not gone as well as it might have done. NDiaye has a reputation as a prickly character and Denis is not exactly known for her easy-going manner. Was there truth in the rumours of a clash of egos?

"Well, that is not exactly what happened," says Denis. "But there were circumstances at the beginning of our relationship that we had to sort out. Marie is a writer and she is used to spending a lot of time on her own, but I always work with people and when I do that I have to spend time with them – a lot of time walking, swimming, eating, talking, living with them. I know that Marie found this difficult at first. She was used to working and thinking without a partner. But we travelled together to Africa and that's when the work came together. I had an African childhood, which Marie did not have, and we discussed that, and what it meant to be white in Africa, and it was from that contradiction that we began to put together White Material."

Denis is impatient with the notion that Chocolat or White Material are autobiographical or even related as films. "No, White Material is not related to Chocolat," she says firmly. "There is no connection at all. They are entirely different visions of Africa and the cinema. Chocolat is about friendship and family, and maybe sex and..."
longing, and White Material is about remaining strong in the face of danger.”

I wonder whether the theme of White Material is in any sense linked to Marguerite Duras's novel Un Barrage contre le Pacifique (published in 1950 and translated into English as The Sea Wall). This is a part-autobiographical novel in which Duras recounts part of her adolescence growing up in French Indochina, and partly a study of French colonialism. It is interesting that this book has twice been made into a film in French – most recently in 2008, starring none other than Isabelle Huppert in a role not unlike the character she plays in White Material.

Denis softens at this. “Marguerite Duras was a very good friend of mine and an intellectual hero. She was also a sort of mother figure. Of course she was an influence. We had a lot in common in our backgrounds. But you have to remember, too, that French colonialism was not just the same experience all over the world. In Algeria the pieds noirs [French settlers] thought that they actually lived in a country called French Algeria and that this was their homeland, even if it was only a fantasy. For people like Marguerite and me, in Indochina or black Africa, we grew up somehow with the sense that we didn't belong, that we were outsiders. So, yes, there are things about that way of growing up that never leave you. There is a sense of marginality perhaps. That is definitely so.”

I also wonder whether Denis's film-making technique owed anything to Duras's literary methods. In the 1950s and 1960s Duras was an avatar of the literary movement called the "nouveau roman". This was a way of building a narrative that leaves out all essential elements – plotting, psychology, narrative twists – leaving only the core inner experience of the central characters as the real texture of the book. This can sometimes be pretentious and deeply tedious, which is why the novels of leading "nouveaux romanciers" such as Alain Robbe-Grillet or Claude Sarraute now seem so dated. But in the hands of a skilled artist such as Duras the technique has a strange, compelling power, especially when she dealt in subjective experiences such as eroticism, grief, terror or joy.

"It is true that I have taken something from Duras, as a writer and as a woman," Denis says. "I grew up mainly reading detective novels and the usual classics at school. But I do admire Duras's novels, and particularly the way that she leaves crucial details out of the book so you are always guessing at the meaning. I have also read Georges Bataille, who was a friend of Duras and a good philosopher, and he talks about life in this way. It is a way of describing how we really live. We are always trying and failing to understand the world and ourselves. We never really know the final meaning of our lives. Literature and the cinema should reflect that."

For all her avowed interest in the drama of humanity, Denis is vague to the point of opacity about her own family life. But as I probe her relationship with her parents, she makes the most self-revealing comment in our conversation, remarking that her cinema should be like her dreams. So what does she dream of? "I dream about a lot of things. I worry about the normal things that a person worries about – my parents are old and my father is ill. My mother is tough but he is not. I worry about my own health, the health of the people I love. I am a human being and my dreams are about all of these things, not always good, not always bad."

This is key to understanding the mysteries of the cinema of Claire Denis. She is fascinated by the intimacy and frailty of human relations, and tries not to categorise or define those experiences. She is drawn to extremes of experience – violence is a key motif, but so are betrayal and troubled sexuality. This tendency has led her to make mistakes. Perhaps her most disastrous error was the 2001 film Trouble Every Day, starring Vincent Gallo and Béatrice Dalle. Its ludicrous plot about sex-hungry cannibalistic vampires in Paris drew derisive laughter when it was screened in Cannes and its gory scenes had even hardened horror fans retching in disgust. Denis found herself briefly bracketed with the "new French extremity" wave of films, fashionable in the late 1990s for depicting sex and death with pornographic relish. "Extreme" directors included the likes of Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat and Bertrand Bonello, who all claimed to be extending the boundaries of the cinema by outraging one another in nastiness.

That is not where Claire Denis belonged at all. At this distance the best we could agree about Trouble Every Day is that the sly and moody soundtrack by British band Tindersticks is superb. Denis has a longstanding association with Tindersticks' singer Stuart Staples and the band have provided several soundtracks to her films, including White Material.

At its best, however, her work is truly "prismatic". That is a word, often overused by cinema critics, to describe work that is dreamy, elliptical and apparently disconnected from real life. Denis's approach is to take on reality from a variety of angles – she refracts real experience with a cinematic method that always seeks to conceal more than it reveals. In this way, as seen in the dream-like, terrible landscapes of White Material, she can literally open up a new field of vision.

This approach was not part of her ambition when she started making pictures, she says now. "I always wanted to make an epic. I love epic adventures as I have always loved travelling. An epic adventure takes you on a journey to a place that you have never been before. That is why I love the cinema of David Lean. When you went to see Ryan's Daughter or Lawrence of Arabia, he took you on a journey, and you never knew quite where it was going, or what it was going to mean. That kind of cinema is gone now. The technology has changed. The digital era also means that the money has gone. But it is a proud ambition for a film-maker to have, to take the viewer somewhere new."

So does this mean that for all her reputation as a difficult and tricky film-maker, she also has a simpler aim: to entertain? "The cinema gives pleasure, certainly. But most of all for me, film-making is a journey into the impossible. When I make a film I have to be like a military commander, in charge of every strategy and tactic, but I never really know where we are going."

At this point she leans across to me, and she finally has a warm if secretive smile. "But of course," she says, "I can never let anyone know this."
Part One: Invitations to Travel

**Aimé Ancian**: As a child, you travelled a lot... What was your first contact with cinema?

**Claire Denis**: I lived in Africa and I had an itinerant childhood; I changed houses every two years. My father couldn’t stand our not knowing about geography. So, even when we were in France we tracked through the whole territory with the family. I have lived in Africa, but with him even travelling in France was exotic.

**AA**: What was your first contact with cinema?

**CD**: My mother, instead of telling me stories, ‘told’ me films. She loved the cinema very much. Later, my first memories of ‘true’ cinema were King Vidor’s *War and Peace* (1956) and Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (1955). Otherwise, in Africa, I would see war films: America flooded us with stocks of damaged, awful copies. In a way, I loved these films; it was always Japanese planes being shot down by American pilots, Pacific islands swarming with cruel Japanese. I think that made us quite anti-American: we were scandalised to see the Japanese with their little leather helmets being beaten all the time. That was enough to make us suspicious.

**AA**: Your films are packed with literary references. Did you read a lot?

**CD**: I went to school like other children. But yes, as an adolescent I used to read more, adventure stories for example.

**AA**: Conrad, Stevenson?

**CD**: My father found Stevenson too cynical, too cruel. I used to read Jack London. Stevenson I discovered later, by myself. Conrad, I think through my father. My mother was a reader of detective stories, the *Série Noire* (Black Series), the *Masque*. At high school I read the classic literature that I was required to read. Then, at home, I pinched my mother’s detective stories and I read them in bed. I adored the *Série Noire* because it was very erotic, because there were women with enormous breasts. I adored Ed McBain…

**AA**: Jim Thompson?

**CD**: I discovered Thompson later, when it became fashionable. With Thompson there was less pleasure, it was more a critique of America. Whereas with Carter Brown, Chester Himes, James Hadley Chase… it was very erotic and when you’re an adolescent, that’s very important. They talked about America too, but differently. When I was about 14, Faulkner made me leave the *Série Noire*. It was a wrench. With Faulkner I was struck dumb with pain, even to this day. Quite a lot of people tell me that for them Dostoyevsky was a revelation…I read Dostoyevsky a bit like a task. Whereas with Faulkner, it was a plunge into the senses, into terror and into the pain of his characters. It was unheard of especially at high school to read Faulkner, where we were immersed in French literature. To go to Faulkner from there was like going back into something so violent. *Sanctuary* is terrifying, this young girl from a good family who is raped in a brothel. But you don’t have the rich and the baddies. The poor sell depravity to the rich, it’s more complicated. I found Stendhal or Balzac great, but more in terms of satisfying a literary taste; whereas with Faulkner, Chandler too, these were shocks of an incredible intensity. I felt my life take a somersault.

**AA**: Despite this, you didn’t pursue literary studies...

**CD**: I studied economics, it was completely suicidal. Everything pissed me off. And at the same time I had this kind of crazy way of doing things. I wanted to go and live in England so I could be Eric Burdon, the singer from *The Animals*. There too, a terrible shock. And then, in fact, I went and enrolled in oriental languages, I got married…

**AA**: And you did the IDHEC [today the FEMIS, the French film school, the Fondation Européenne des Métiers de l’Image et du Son]…

**CD**: My husband was a photographer, and I was helping him. One day he told me that I should seriously think about what I wanted to do. I did an internship for Télé Nger – an educational channel teaching literacy via the cinema – then in the research department, which became the INA (Institut National de l’Audiovisuel). One day I told everyone: “I’m going to get into IDHEC”. I didn’t even really know what that was. They replied: “No, don’t waste your time studying, all you need to do is make films here with us.” But I don’t know what got into me, I went up to the entrance exam and I was accepted. I didn’t at all think I would make films, it was a point in my life where I just told myself: here I am, let’s take advantage of it. The idea of having a project, for example, of becoming a director, the very idea of having any sort of ambition, I found that quite abject. To be honest, it wasn’t only me, it was the times also.

**AA**: Was it after 1968?

**CD**: Yes, it was in 1972. So I came out of IDHEC like a zombie. I still didn’t have the desire to be a director; I just wanted to take part in events and experiences. I did training work on films; I met people. And I had this unimaginable chance to work for Rivette. It took me many years to appreciate the New Wave. Chabrol, Truffaut, Godard, I found them sectarian. The only one who seemed absolutely incredible to me was Rivette. At the same time I also did training work with a director called Robert Enrico. That was a much more professional approach. But I didn’t feel myself loved, I think he’d appointed me because I had intrigued him, but it was a very masochistic experience.

**AA**: Why?

**CD**: Because I was so non-conformist that I was always being yelled at. After a while, I was seized by a kind of anguish. I realised that I wanted to make films but I continued to find that immodest. At the same time I was telling myself: I’ll have to change. The world was changing, it was less fun to be rebellious – if you could say I was rebellious – it was less fun to be “floating”. All of a sudden, everything solidified but I continued to live differently. I had a Jamaican period. But I clearly saw that the years were passing and that I’d have to accept my desire.

**AA**: What made you want to make films?

**CD**: Not at all the very fine films I had seen as an adolescent; sometimes it was documentaries or encounters. Perhaps it was [Jean-François] Stévenin that I understood best of all. He was a bit like me, not in a hurry to get results. He was an assistant; we saw each other during filming. He really wanted me to become a singer; he even wanted to write lyrics for me. And then, there were these two stars above us, Rivette and Eustache.

**AA**: *Passe-Montagne* (1978 debut film by Jean-François Stévenin) seems to have made an impression on a lot of people.
CD: When I saw *Passe-Montagne*, I had already decided to stop playing at false modesty. But *Passe-Montagne* is unique. You know, we often make fun of the intellectual content of a certain kind of cinema. It wasn’t at all that kind of cinema – *Passe-Montagne* was a film of flesh and blood, which resembled ourselves. After all that, I worked for a year in Israel, on a Costa-Gavras film, at the beginning of the Intifada. There I lived through something which was more intense than cinema. I came back home, I had written a screenplay but I was very disoriented. The era of *Passe-Montagne* had passed.

AA: You ended up meeting Wim Wenders and working with him.

CD: One day he called me and said: “Come to the United States”. I discovered a very different form of production: there wasn’t on the one hand the screenplay, the budget, the choice of actors, the music… Everything was absolutely connected and deep down that’s what I was looking for. To also have the time to drive, drive, drive whilst listening to music, and dreaming up the screenplay which was being modified day by day by calling Sam Shepard. It was something indescribable for a little French girl.

AA: And through Wenders you came across Cassavetes…

CD: Yes, he had the same type of script as Wim on *Paris, Texas* (1984). But Cassavetes was more inaccessible, his films were already a little out of reach, like *La Maman et la Putain* (Eustache, 1973). Whereas with Wim, we were actually making them, there was no need to admire.

AA: People often speak of Cassavetes’ energy…

CD: Yes, but it’s not like charging round with a camera on your shoulder or whatever, it’s above all the energy of being the man he was. I think there’s no actor I’ve liked as much as Ben Gazzara in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976/8). When we were filming the death of Alex Descas in *S’en fout la mort* (*No Fear, No Die*, 1990), I was all the time thinking of that same death, this death which in the same way is expected, which brings relief but is also painful. It’s true, I can say that *S’en fout la mort* could be dedicated to that film.

AA: Let’s come back to your travels through the United States.

CD: When I was working with Wim I rushed off towards landscapes I had always dreamed of crossing, without realising that, finally, they didn’t interest me as much as all that. I liked crossing the United States, to drive along listening to Bob Dylan or the Pretenders, but I’d been born in a different world, where relationships with the landscape, with the people around you, are different. And I told myself: that’s it, I dreamt of America but, deep down, it doesn’t concern me. The best thing that happened to me was in fact to have met John Lurie and Jim Jarmusch. I became friends with them, and it’s thanks to them that I liked America. Otherwise, even if there were magnificent landscapes, I was too much of a foreigner. You know, I was twice asked to make films in the United States. I was even offered *Boys Don’t Cry*. That was six years ago, but I didn’t like the idea of making that film. I had just done *J’ai pas sommeil* (*I Can’t Sleep*, 1993), I got the impression that they were offering me yet another news-in-brief item: “Oh her, she likes news items, that’s her thing.” What further bothered me was to be forced to proclaim at the outset that because I was a foreigner I was going to see things more clearly. As far as that’s concerned, I don’t believe in it at all. I think that you can only feel yourself an outsider if you are part of a community. The outsider’s view, I don’t believe in it… Me, if I’d done it, that’s how I would have seen these little Americans, these tragic communities, everyone is unemployed, people are living in caravans, girls of 14 committing credit card fraud, brawls every day and first babies being born to girls who are 13 years old. To come along in black jeans and make a compassionate film, I could not have done that.

Part Two: The “little commando”

AA: Is it from Wenders and Jarmusch that you have sort of inherited a concern for music?

CD: Jarmusch organised his life like a rock artist. I think he’s conscious that there isn’t an art of living inherent in the cinema, there’s only music which gives the taste of a certain kind of life. Cinema is a battle with people you don’t want to meet, with constraints you don’t want to have. I wasn’t really sure that I liked white rock. White rock for me was The Animals, Eric Burdon, because deep down I would like to have been Eric Burdon. When he left for Los Angeles and when he formed a group with War, with black musicians, that to me seemed magic. So I have in some sense stopped at Earth, Wind and Fire. I can go and listen to Sonic Youth and I’ll like it but my alchemy has already been cast.

AA: Murat and the Tindersticks have meant a lot to you and your films.

CD: With Murat, I was disturbed by his songs and I wrote to him. I am an assiduous reader of Bayon (writer and chronicler with *Libération*, French leftist newspaper), who had a childhood somewhat similar to mine. So, I’d read his novels, we pursued a correspondence and he spoke a lot to me about Murat, who was his friend. Bayon sent me some demos, and one day he said to me: “why don’t you write to him, why don’t you go and see him in Auvergne?” And that’s how it happened, thanks to Bayon. Murat comes to see my films, we swap critical advice; he means a lot to me. When I look at the weather report on TV, I always check the temperature in Auvergne...

AA: The first scene of *Trouble Every Day* (2001), the scene of the kiss with the Tindersticks song is of such beauty…

CD: That’s not where it was in the screenplay – that kiss – it was elsewhere, during a nocturnal ramble by Vincent Gallo, which incidentally wasn’t filmed. But I still wanted to shoot the kiss because the kiss is the film. In the screenplay, the first scene is the scene in the plane. Stuart of the Tindersticks wanted to write a song, but not for the beginning of the film. And when I heard his song, I said to him: “Stuart, I think it should be at the beginning, you can’t put it in after.” And so we can’t begin with the plane, everything has to be pushed...
back for Stuart’s song. In fact, I think Stuart channelled everything into the song: he had not seen the rushes, but he had read the screenplay, he had come to London to see Beau Travail (2000), at the time of a retrospective of my films… I think he had understood that I was ready for a lot of things. And he brought me this song. Stuart is an English man with a lot more humour than I have, but he has a rapport with the body, with flesh, with desire which is very close to mine.

AA: You work a bit like Wenders, where as you were saying, everything is connected…

CD: You know, in Trouble Every Day there is this scene where Vincent Gallo is looking at his wife taking a bath, and you can see pubic hair moving in the water. That’s one of Stuart’s songs. On his second CD there is a song called Sea Weeds and the story is just that. I truly wrote the scene because of that song. There is a lot of criss-crossing in my films.

AA: And at the same time you give a lot of importance to the screenplay and to your long-standing collaboration with Jean-Pol Fargeau.

CD: I have been working with Jean-Pol Fargeau since the beginning, since Chocolat (1988). I had at first been in other African countries, then we wrote the screenplay in Marseilles and then we went off to Cameroon. Meeting him was decisive for me.

AA: How do you see the articulation between the screenplay and the filming itself?

CD: I don’t at all like the idea of a screenplay being a cage and that inside the cage you have to direct the actors. It seems to me that a screenplay is a kind of take-off and that the best moment is to see the characters taking off. They can turn left, or right, loop the loop, whatever. And at the same time you’re always a bit afraid. As long as they don’t crash. Because if filming means you have to control everything, I’d shoot myself. You already have to control the framing, the colours, the costumes, the sets and all that. But that’s done before, the control’s done before.

AA: For Beau Travail you had written “booklets” rather than a screenplay…

CD: It was Jean-Pol’s idea, because since we didn’t have the authorisation to shoot in Djibouti, and so as not to be bored to death, we wrote Galoup’s remembrances, Galoup’s diary. And I was able to have it read by Chevalier (director of the fiction unit of Arte) or by Denis Lavant, to give them an idea of what the film was like. After that, we wrote the screenplay based on these booklets.

AA: There is also Agnès Godard, your Director of Photography, with whom you have not stopped working.

CD: I knew Agnès, in fact, from before; we had worked on The Wings of Desire (Wenders, 1987), in Berlin. But it was on Chocolat that something really happened. It was hard in Cameroon; I was not seeing the rushes. It was so distressing that Agnès and I told each other we were going to look for something simple. So we worked with only two lenses. I realised that that’s what made the film, that we shouldn’t try anything else, but rather look for the film inside of these framings. I thought that it was better to have time for reflexion than extra material. That’s how our relationship began.

AA: And it has become stronger ever since, notably on Nénette et Boni (1996) and Beau Travail.

CD: Yes, Nénette et Boni was very important: Agnès and I both understood to what point we had progressed together, to what point we each wanted to continue making films. I understood that I wasn’t just asking Agnès to frame the image, but that quite simply I wanted to make films with her.

So that when Grandperret and Chevalier said to me: “If you’ve got three or four months, come and do this ‘Foreign Lands’ collection with us”, I was so strong in my relationship with Agnès that I accepted. So that she and I could go further. Not in experimentation, but in the pleasure of working together.

AA: But the shooting of Beau Travail was very trying.

CD: Yes, it was much longer and more complicated than we’d foreseen and we had no guarantee about completing the filming. Fortunately, I had had time to work with Bernardo Montet (the choreographer), I had rehearsed with the actors, Agnès and I were ready. We had so many problems that each day we would say to each other: well, well, we’re still filming! And as a result, paradoxically, this freed up something very joyous in our little commando.

AA: Another impetus for your films is your very strong relationship with the actors. One feels for example that you made Nénette et Boni in order to continue your relationship with Alice Houri and Grégoire Colin, which you had entered into in US Go Home (1994).

CD: I met Grégoire for the casting of US Go Home and straight after that I wanted to make Nénette et Boni with Alice and Grégoire. I had loved those four weeks of filming with them so much that I wanted more. I wanted to re-film with them.

AA: Consequently there are many recurrent figures in your cinema. Isaach de Bankolé, Alex Descas, Béatrice Dalle, Vincent Gallo…

CD: Isaach is someone who gave me courage. For Chocolat, I wanted to find the main character, the boy, in Cameroon. But the actors found the subject of the film degrading… I was a bit taboo, because in my head it was the inverse. Fortunately, Isaach, whom I had not met but whom I had seen in Black micmac (by Thomas Gilou), came to see me. With Isaach, it’s a pact, an alliance, which continues. He is in New York, he has worked with Jarmusch, and together we’ve got plans.

AA: Another important encounter came next with Béatrice Dalle.

CD: Béatrice Dalle, that’s when Jim Jarmusch wanted to make Night on Earth (1992). He was looking for an actress to play the young blind woman. He asked one or two actresses that he quite liked, knowing all the time he wanted it to be Béatrice. I was already very dazzled by Béatrice since Betty Blue (Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1986). And during Jim’s shoot we got to know each other. When we began J’ai pas sommeil, the role of Alex Descas’s young wife had been written for another French actress. And then, almost the night before filming began, she decided not to do the film, she found it too sordid, it was bad for her career… I was knocked flat because after all I had written this role for her. That’s when Béatrice said to me:
“Listen, Claire, I heard that you’re in deep trouble, I’ve got two free weeks.” It wasn’t at all written for her, it was the story of a child-woman, not of a very beautiful woman. Of someone still a little girl, a bit fragile. I told her this, but she answered: “Who cares, we can change it.” From then on it was almost normal that we should work together again.

AA: Béatrice Dalle drags along her myth…

CD: She gives very little indication that she’s an actress. Her behaviour always has this kind of dilettante feel to it, she never speaks about work; she has this way of making everyone believe she’s a ‘natural’. That’s a bit of a defence. From that, to see only the mythical part of her, or her rather scandalous declarations, or her unbelievable beauty… You know, it’s hard to have her physical attributes and to also be frank; it has created a kind of quid pro quo about her. Whereas behind all that, she loves to work, she likes and defends the films she makes. In fact she invades her films.

AA: I also very much like Katerina Golubeva in J’ai pas sommeil. Her role is very surprising, it’s a character who runs parallel to the narration of the news item. Why did you introduce her?

CD: It seemed essential to me, because I did not want to use the old woman’s killer as a character, as the thread we follow. I wanted us to discover him, as we do when we open a newspaper and discover a foreign universe. When I worked on the screenplay with Jean-Pol I always imagined that Paris with its ring road was like the goose game (French spiral board game). And I saw a foreign woman arrive and enter this Paris which arouses fear. I think that I would not have made the film without this structure. At the start it was supposed to be a young Spanish girl whom Isabelle Huppert wanted to play. But the dates kept changing and one day in Berlin I met Katerina. So the film was made with her and today I find it hard to imagine it without her.

AA: You often say that about your films and your actors. Denis Lavant in Beau Travail, for example.

CD: You know, I did believe in it for a moment with Isabelle, and I think that when you believe in something, it works. A film is an expandable structure, where space is invaded by the actors. So everything is possible. If we had made the film with Isabelle, I think that afterwards we would have said: “Without Isabelle, there was no film.”

AA: You have a particular rehearsal method: often you rehearse other scenes...

CD: There are films where you need to rehearse, but it’s true, I don’t like rehearsing scenes that I’m about to shoot. So there are times when you need to rehearse something a little different. Jean-Pol and I write scenes which are not in the script, just for rehearsal purposes. Because I’m too afraid, if I rehearse a scene, that I’ll find myself saying during the shoot: it was so good earlier, now it’s gone. I think what’s painful for me when I’m not shooting is to have to exist. I don’t mean ‘to live’, because that’s something else again. You have to justify everything you do. What I like during filming is that these are moments when you have the right not to reply and to let things happen. Before the shoot, after the shoot, you have to account for everything.

Part Three: Vendredi Soir

AA: Your films have always been nourished by literature, but with Vendredi Soir you surrender yourself to a faithful adaptation. Why choose this book by Emmanuèle Bernheim?

CD: I love Emmanuèle’s books, her way of describing sensations. A manner so precise, so meticulous, which contains in the same phrase both the conscious and the unconscious, as well as that which is experienced and that which is desired. Actually, at the time we were both working on another project. And I think we went round in circles for a year, because neither of us was brave enough to admit that we didn’t like the project. We went to see the producer and told him we couldn’t manage it. Emmanuèle said to me: “but deep down, what do you want to do?” I said to her, “I would like a small space with the town all around. A man, a woman”. She laughed and set up a meeting in a café. There she handed me a manuscript she had just completed, ‘Vendredi Soir’. It was unbelievable for me. I said yes, even though I felt that a lot of people didn’t believe in it and thought that you couldn’t adapt it to the cinema.

Everyone thought it needed more fictional detail, narrative, incidents. But I said no. Emmanuèle thought like me, that we needed to stay completely with the book, that nothing should be added.

AA: What I like in Vendredi Soir is the refusal of all psychology, or at least psychology such as it is conceived in the majority of films. I think it would have been a mistake to want to “psychologize” the story.

CD: That’s what I told myself. I think Emmanuèle had more confidence in me than I did myself. At the start I said to Emmanuèle: we’ll have to write a voice-over. And we began to write a version with a voice-over. I think that in the third session working on the film I reread what we had done and I said to her: Emmanuèle, what do you think about it? And we told each other, no. I think that the fact of working without a safety net forced me to have absolute faith in the cinema.

To have absolute faith in the actress and actor with whom I wanted to work. I thought that she, he and the director were all, that nothing else was needed. I tried the voice-over for three or four days, but it emptied out what was at stake in the film.

AA: There is very little dialogue in Vendredi Soir and what’s more, it is deliberately a bit silly...

CD: When people read the book, they all said: “Ah, for once there’s going to be dialogue!” But in fact, it’s often internal dialogue. There isn’t much spoken out loud in the film, even though we retained nearly all the dialogue from the book. There are perhaps one or two bits of dialogue which we suppressed during the filming, because the actors did not want to deliver them.

AA: You have said that you consider dialogue akin to noise...

CD: Yeah, I might say that, but it’s theoretical and I’m not at all theoretical and even less a theoretician. For Vendredi Soir, because the film had to be an adaptation of the book, I didn’t even ask myself the question. I thought about the book all the time, that’s all. So when the film was edited, I said: “Yes, there’s not much
dialogue”, but I had not been conscious of this. In Nénette et Boni the dialogue came out in spurs, not because I didn’t like it but because Grégoire was sulking. I don’t know, that’s how it is, I don’t try and explain it. Still, there was a bit of dialogue in US Go Home. I liked that dialogue, it was almost comedy. I found that quite good. And then, there have been times when Jean-Pol and I got cold feet and wrote dialogues which were explanatory or psychological in other screenplays.

AA: In ‘Vendredi Soir’ the book, an enormous number of things are communicated through smell. How did you envisage rendering that through the means available to cinema?

CD: You know, I’ve always thought about smell. I’ve always thought that to be attracted to someone had to have something to do with smell. And there is even a scene in Nénette et Boni where Valéria Bruni-Tedeschi speaks at great length with Gégoire Colin, and she’s speaking to us about smells. See, there are dialogues in Nénette et Boni after all! And that particular dialogue is very good. But smells, you can imagine them in the cinema. You can speak of smells in the cinema because you do have bodies present.

AA: The book seems to be more daring in the love scenes…

CD: The book is more daring because it’s in words. Whatever is written in words, needs to, or has to become cinema. But the book is both daring and modest. The words are daring but the form is modest. So for film, what’s the point of being daring when the form is modest? And the man is respectful of this modesty. It would be a misinterpretation. And anyway, whatever is daring in the cinema is pretty awful, there isn’t much. Once you have shown the sexual parts of the man and the woman…

AA: Why Vincent Lindon and Valérie Lemercier?

CD: Vincent Lindon because Emmanuèle and I first thought of the man, that seemed more logical to us. I thought again of his role in Le Septième Ciel (Seventh Heaven, Benoît Jacquot, 1998) and I found that Vincent was so much like that man. Whereas in the book, he is older. But for me, from the outset, it was he and no one else.

AA: Why was his name changed? In the book it’s Frédéric and in the film it’s Jean.

CD: It was Vincent who did not want to be called Frédéric. He hated Frédéric, which I can understand. And then we chose ‘Jean’ because I told him he looked like Jean Gabin in profile with his cigarette…He had read the book, I sent him the script. He said yes at our first meeting. And Valérie Lemercier, I realized that all these years I’d been going to see Valérie’s shows, her films…She seduced me enormously. I’m a bit of a Valérie Lemercier groupie, so I already knew her a little bit too. I told myself that for that particular role, there was a certain logic.

AA: You know, a lot of people won’t be able to stop themselves thinking of In the Mood for Love (Wong Kar-Wai, 2000) when viewing your film.

CD: Really? I sincerely thought of Emmanuèle above all and her book, and then I think the presence of Valérie and Vincent voided a lot of cinemagraphic references… Someone made a remark which made me laugh: someone told me that in between the softness of skins and the bodies of cars he had thought of the (David) Cronenberg film, Crash (1996). Yeah, well, that I understood. In the Mood for Love is a film I like very much, but I know Wong Kar-Wai and for me there is an enormous difference between the two films. In the Mood for Love is a film in the past, a film of memories, a nostalgic film. Whereas it seems to me Vendredi Soir is a film in the present, and very concrete.

AA: I very much like the slightly Hitchcockian section where Valerie absconds…

CD: That’s because the music is by Shostakovich and Bernard Herrmann was very much inspired by Shostakovich. It was deliberate, because in the novel there are two or three Hitchcock quotes. The young man in the hotel, for example. But it’s best not to talk of Hitchcock references because everyone’s doing it. All those who believe that cinema is image and sound are stating the obvious. I have always made films with desire. I think it is the primary material of my films. Basically, Hitchcock films are about desire becoming twisted. Except perhaps for Notorious (1946), at the beginning, but you feel that the disaster has already been set up earlier. That is to say, Cary Grant is obliged to tame Ingrid Bergman before beginning to desire her. So already there is something more subtle than desire. It’s because he despises her that he is going to desire her. I think that I am less subtle than that.

Marcin Wisniewski: White Material (Senses of Sineman, 18 June 2012):

One could say that sound has always featured as an important element in the work of Claire Denis. Her 1999 Beau travail is a choreographed dance set to various pieces of music. However, it is not until Vendredi soir (2002) and 35 rhums (2008) that sound asserts itself as the most important element. Almost bereft of dialogue, the films rely on the compositions of the group Tindersticks (and various figures within it) to provide emotional cues. Denis’ most recent feature, White Material (2009), continues the director’s preoccupation with sound. Sparse in dialogue (save for explanatory purposes), the film also has a very sparse musical soundtrack save for its theme, composed by long-time musical collaborator Stuart Staples from Tindersticks. Instead, the film relies heavily on diegetic sound to explore and imply moods and feelings, and most importantly to enhance the difficult and complex processes of the creation of the self.

In White Material Denis follows the personal journey of Maria Vial (Isabelle Huppert), a coffee plantation boss in an unnamed French-African colony during the last days of colonial rule. As the film unfolds, we witness Maria’s struggle to retain her belief that while the country may not be her true home, she is accepted there. By placing at the centre of the narrative a white woman who believes she belongs to the land, against a set of people who see her presence as oppressive and who want to brutalise her, yet who also carry out acts of violence against one another, Denis returns to the core themes of her earlier films (such as Chocolat, 1988) – the highly problematic
issues inherent in the processes of colonisation and decolonisation. Denis’ exploration of the colonial narrative presents us with three particular “bodies” or subjectivities (or rather “subjectivities-in-between” as defined by Alison Butler affected by the colonial process: Maria (the coloniser), the Boxer (the colonised played by Issaach De Bankolé) and Manuel, Maria’s son played by Nicolas Duvauchelle. Born in the colony, of French parents, Manuel is the ultimate body-in-between, belonging neither to France nor the place of his birth. Sound, for all three, is deployed differently to illustrate the complexities of identity creation.

The film’s soundtrack resounds with the noise of doors slamming, footsteps, the wind, insects, the cracking of the dry earth and grass, the engines of vehicles (bus, truck, and motorbike), the rolling of the coffee beans, the digging of the ground, children’s screams, and, most disturbingly, young throats being slashed by the army fighters and the cracking of the suffocating fire which ultimately kills Manuel. Many of these sounds belong to the land. It would be too simple to say that the calm blowing of the wind, or the buzzing of the insects, or even the rolling of the coffee beans project an idea of an idyllic land; the environment can be both sheltering and treacherous. Yet, these sounds emanate from the same source, they reverberate through the landscape and are received by bodies which appropriate them differently due to their own multiplicity and divergence of experience. Jean-Luc Nancy’s poetic description of truth not as “a naked figure emerging from the cistern but the resonance of that cistern or the echo of the naked figure in the open depths,” presents us with sounds that echo within the characters creating vibrations, which either soothe or aggravate them but none-the-less keep coming and going.

Within the diegetic soundscape of the film the radio figures as one of the most constant suppliers of sound. The radio not only provides the supplementary musical soundtrack in the form of reggae songs but is also a source of news and political incitement. During the film Maria is shown gently stroking the contours of that small sound box. With her fingertips she gracefully touches the radio; her gesture is delicate, as if afraid and hesitant to register the sound waves – and the meaning – emanating from the radio, which at that moment are full of loud and violent rhetoric. Maria’s reaction to the radio highlights her refusal to believe that something completely violent is taking place and also that she is not wanted. As a public mode of communication the radio is heard by all, and if Maria is afraid of its sounds then the young rebel army is incited by the rebel DJ who speaks of the Boxer’s victory. For them the anger discharged by the DJ’s voice and carried by the radio’s speakers is not a sign of danger but a call to action. The sound arms them with cause, reason, and courage and as such, they travel in a stolen truck raucous, loud and full of themselves.

Yet, as a purely audio medium the radio is a transmitter of the voice. It relies on the voice to produce emotions, which enhance meaning. The voice on the other hand is a sound that is not only registered by the body but also created by it. Talking is the most complex of bodily communication methods and relies on the use of highly structured and complex systems of language. Externally produced, language can be seen as a kind supplement to human development, a technology, which has become an integral part of the creation of the self. However, as an intricately constructed mode of communication with grammar and rules of syntax, language is also a powerful tool. The ability to use it and to command it exhibits one’s connection to the system that created it. In his seminal work, Black Skin, White Masks (1967), Frantz Fanon highlights such a point when he explicitly writes: “A man who has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language”, and to possess this world is “to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.” The meaning of these statements is clear. Yet this plays out quite differently in White Material where the three “in-between” bodies have knowledge and a command of the language but use it distinctly to assert their selves in the narrative.

Maria completely assumes her culture through her liberal use of the French language. However, a complication arises when we take into account that language is a tool of patriarchy where to be in control means to be male. Yet, Maria uses her voice, and does so strongly. She counters the assumed cultural position. Her rant against “those whites” is a moment when she attempts to establish her position outside of the unified body of the coloniser. Her conversations with her husband are imbued with a sense of anger and accusation; meanwhile her chat with the farm manger is soft and friendly. In her presence she allows herself to feel tired. She uses language and her vocal intonations to defend and then scold Manuel. She accuses him of not being a human being, of letting himself go, without giving him a chance to explain himself and use language to his own advantage. Thinking that by aggressively using language she will motivate Manuel, she only pushes him away.

The Boxer on the other hand refuses to speak. His silence is the refusal to hear himself speak in the language of the coloniser. While he does engage in dialogue, be it with Maria or the young rebel army – in particular their leader, Jeep (Ali Barkai), who speaks French with a heavy accent – those dialogues are sparse and grounded in the most elementary of topics. Like Protée in Chocolat, the Boxer is a strong presence in the film. His body is imposing, even when laid out due to his increasingly immobilising wound. His stare, strong and cautious, hides a violent history accredited to his local hero status. “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards”, writes Fanon. For the Boxer, to use French as a means of expressing himself is to describe himself in the language of the oppressor – a language that has very few positive adjectives in relation to the colonised – and so, he consciously attempts to escape such a trap. However, a complete refusal to engage on the linguistic level is impossible and so new means have to be established. Aside from his body language, the Boxer offers very little solution to this problem. Yet by refusing to hear the reverberations of the French language in his body, and by filtering the sounds from the outside (the sounds of nature, of gun
shots, of the French language), he allows for a more conscious creation of the self.

As the ultimate body in-between, Manuel’s relationship to language is clearly complicated. Privy to it and aware of the benefits it offers, he uses it sparingly. Unlike his mother he understands that his presence in the country is unwelcome and refuses to establish himself as a clear presence. As the film starts we only hear of Manuel and even when we see him he is sleeping and covered by a blanket. Unlike his mother Manuel understands that he/they are unwanted. This knowledge Manuel gathers from experience, without any conversation and need for language. Within the narrative of the film there are very few instances of Manuel being engaged in conversation. He refuses to speak to his mother, only listens to his father, and screams at the help after his emotional breakdown. In the scene where Manuel follows the truck full of young rebels his screams are almost inaudible under the loud roaring of the engine and the angry ruckus caused by the kids. He doesn’t need proper language to communicate with them, and as such their communication is based on excessive gestures, looks, maniacal laughter. Manuel doesn’t use language as freely as his mother. Not because like the Boxer he refuses but because in the place he is in it offers him nothing. Manuel’s language use aligns him with the child soldiers who also don’t exercise full control of speech but rather yell their orders, supplementing them with body language. Both, Manuel and the young rebels are direct products of a system, which as Fanon points out has a very violent structure.

Rosanna Maule describes the work of Denis as a “troubled intersection of gender, class, ethnicity and cultural identity.” In White Material this intersection is indeed troubled. To highlight the complexities of such convergence, Denis relies on sound and bodily responses as influenced by the philosophy of Nancy to present us with the almost impossible to depict spaces of Butler’s “subjectivity in-between”, which, I would argue, define all of her characters. For, in Denis’ work, as in real life, no one’s self is ever fixed or stable.

ONLY ONE MORE IN THE FALL 2012 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXV:

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CONTACTS:
...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
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Jean Vigo, L’Atalante 1947
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Kon Ichikawa, Revenge of a Kabuki Actor 1963
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Volker Schlöndorf, The Tin Drum 1979
Mike Leigh, Naked 1994
Michael Cimino, Heaven’s Gate 2000
Paul Thomas Anderson, Punch-Drunk Love 2002
Sidney Lumet, Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead 2007
Zack Snyder, Watchmen 2009
Marleen Gorris, Within the Whirlwind 2009