



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

White Material

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A film by: Claire Denis

©: Why Not Productions, Wild Bunch,
France 3 Cinéma

Production Companies: Why Not Productions,
Wild Bunch, France 3 Cinéma

With the participation of: Canal+,
France Télévisions, TPS Star,

Centre national de la cinématographie

In association with: Les Films Terre Africaine,
Cinéma 2, Sofica UGC 1

With the support of: Procirep

Production Executives: Martine Cassinelli,
Bassek Ba Kobhio

Production Managers: Albert Blasius, Isabelle Tillou

Production Supervisor: Thibault Mattei

Production Administration: Laurent Berthou

Post-production Supervisor: Béatrice Mauduit

1st Assistant Director: Jean-Paul Allègre

2nd Assistant Directors: Anaïs Minet,
Gervais Djimeli Lepka

2nd 2nd Assistant Director: Lucie Borleteau

Script Supervisor: Zoé Zurstrassen

Casting: Nicolas Lublin, Narcisse Mbarga,
Richard Rousseau, Antoine Carrard

Screenplay: Claire Denis, Marie N'Diaye

Script Collaborator: Lucie Borleteau

Director of Photography: Yves Cape

Gaffer: Bruno Verstraete

Key Grip: Stéphane Thiry

Visual Effects: Éclair VFX

Special Effects: Pierre-Olivier Persin,
Karen Fingerhut, Erwan Simon

Editor: Guy Lecorne

Assistant Editor: Sandie Bompar

Art Director: Alain Veissier

Set Decorator: Saint-Père Abiassi

Costume Designer: Judy Shrewsbury

Make-up: Thi-Loan Nguyen, Danièle Vuarin

Hair Stylist: Antonella Prestigiacomo

Main Titles: Charlotte Bayle

Colour Timers: Gérard Savary, Marine Lepoutre

Negative Cutters: GTC, Jorg Dettman

Original Music: tindersticks

String Arrangements: Lucy Wilkins

Sound Recordist: Jean-Paul Mugel

Sound in Cameroon: Christophe Winding

Re-recording Mixer: Christophe Vingtrinier

Supervising Sound Editors: Christophe Winding,
Josefina Rodriguez

Sound Editor: Sandie Bompar

Armourers: Fred Cauvy, René Djikou

Cast:

Isabelle Huppert (*Maria Vial*)

Christophe Lambert (*André Vial*)

Nicolas Duvauchelle (*Manuel Vial*)

William Nadylam (*Chérif, the mayor*)

Michel Subor (*Henri Vial, the landlord*)

Isaac De Bankolé (*the Boxer*)

Adèle Ado (*Lucie, Andre's wife*)

Ali Barkai (*Jeep, leader of the rebel children*)

Jean-Marie Ahanda

Martin Poulibe

Patrice Eya

Serge Mong

Mama Njouam

Thomas Dumerchez

Christine-Ange Tatah

Suzanne Ayuck

Daniel Tchangan (*José*)

Lionnel Messi Inoussa

Antoine Ndichut

Wakeu Fogaing

Claire Denis' films aspire to a crystalline purity. Even when packed with the stuff of social and political unrest – war, murder, racial tension, unemployment, refugees, families in crisis – they give the sense of having dropped, in the course of their elaboration, whatever 'message' they may have intended at the outset. What remains, in the end, is a cryptic diagram of bodies and desires, environments and landscapes, confrontations and evasions, things said and unsaid. At its best (*Beau Travail*, *Vendredi soir*, *35 Shots of Rum*), Denis' cinema is compelling in its skeletal purity, beckoning viewers to enter the work and fill the gaps with their own imaginations.

White Material is at once an extremely physical and utterly abstract political melodrama. Working for the first time with novelist Marie N'Diaye rather than her usual script collaborator Jean-Pol Fargeau, Denis deliberately leaves obscure the exact year in which the action unfolds, or even the precise location in Africa. The situation that is so vividly sketched here – rebels versus militia, as workaday citizens flee for their lives and are often caught in the crossfire – would appear to be an amalgam of many moments in contemporary history: Rwanda, Angola, Indonesia... The conflict is, to use a much-abused word, universal; Denis aims for a level of generalised metaphor, but always through very precise, concrete details. She is careful, too, not to take sides, at least on the most obvious level of the dramatisation; only in fleeting moments like the final shot (when a soldier secretes the red beret which is the memoir-token of the rebel leader known as 'the Boxer') do we feel her natural sympathy for the rebels emerge.

Of course, Africa has special and specific significance for Denis, as announced by her debut feature *Chocolat* (1988), which took off from autobiographical experience. The continent's culture and its transnational mutations form a constant presence and reference in her work. In *White Material*, as always, Denis takes an oblique rather than frontal angle; she truly puts the 'post' into post-colonial, as the primal scene of colonial encounter and trauma is never quite as intriguing to her as the often subtle aftershocks of a faded imperial expansion. Hence the story here – and certainly the power-play of white dominating black – is virtually over as soon as it begins, the 'white material' (the title refers to a cigarette lighter) already in tatters. We first see Maria (Isabelle Huppert) alone on a road, already divested of whatever colonial aura she once may have possessed, and from that point the action (such as it is) is a bleak body-countdown to total devastation. Yet the actual depiction of violence is restrained, unspectacular, almost Bressonian; blood doesn't burst from sudden wounds, but seeps slowly through clothes, or is listlessly bathed in by children.

Maria might seem to be a distant relative of Bette Davis in any number of 1930s and '40s melodramas, or of the heroine of Doris Lessing's classic 1950 novel *The Grass Is Singing*, which Huppert initially wanted Denis to adapt. *White Material* focuses on Maria's determination and perseverance, but it never romanticises her. Maria's stubborn wilfulness and her blindness to the social situation around her – not to mention its horrible effects on everyone close to her – create a bubble around this character; instead of empathising with her, we are invited to take up a critical distance.

Curiously, the ultimate tone of the piece, at least on an intellectual plane, is closer to Richard Fleischer's much-derided slavery epic *Mandingo* (1975) than it is to most melodramas centred on plucky women; in a Denis diagram,

Denise Djuikom
Marie-Françoise Wouogo
Christian Bitang
Justin Ambassa
Bernard Yopa
M. Ibrahim
Catherine Matzi
Madeleine Manipet
Ebenezer Repombia
ficha
Armand Tamo
La Petite Poupou Poutougnigni
Junior Ndam, Ousmane Djam, Astrid Nganong,
André Penka, Ferdinand Fondini, Thierry Kondep,
William Touazong, Ibrahim Moutala, Nelson Tapio
Bili, Delphine Yenda, Amadou Yaya, Joël Yimeli,
Jafarou Abdou, Aïcha Ndam, Acoudou Foupa
Aponini, Rodrigue Fomata, Abraham Walache,
Antoine Ndichut, Etienne Njaourou, Marsile Yene,
Dorotheé Ngouem, Basile Kamga, Gervais
Batcharon (*child soldiers*)
Amadou Mfongoun, Daïrou Michinawa, Amadou
Njoya, Pierre Balla, John Hakem, Alain Douala,
Rafihou, Emmanuel Fotie, Menoudi, Boniface
Noyongoyo, Arnaud Ndam, Jacques Chirac,
Benjamin Kijike, Omar Sanda, Mbeyap Njuwou,
Saïdou Yarou (*plantation workers*)
Alexandre Souffo, Maître Charlie, Achille Ngwem,
Maître Mathias, Abdel Cherif, Chouaïbou (*bandits*)
Germain Gnamsie Moumie, Hugues Tchoumegne,
Elvis Petro, Richard Rangou, Nsangou Saidou,
Vincent Tantoh, Lamaré Njikam, Salifou Dongoua,
Cédric Attely, Félix Fifen (*Cherif's militia*)
France-Cameroun 2009©
106 mins
Digital

The screening on Wed 6 Dec will include an intro
by film curator Abiba Coulibaly

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typically, we watch all the figures flail around inside the contradictions of their personal and social positions. An emblematic character, in this respect, is Maria's father-in-law Henri (Michel Subor), who, while representing the imperial patriarch taking up space in a foreign land, is an oddly passive, even benign presence (frequently seen near-naked) who speaks of Africa as the only true home he has ever known; indeed, all references to France in the film conjure it as some ghostly, unimaginable, lost point of origin for these 'white materials'.

Ultimately, Denis presents a 'history of violence' that has more in common with *Lord of the Flies* (novel or films) or Philippe Grandrieux's paroxysmic *La Vie nouvelle* (2002) than with any Hollywood melodrama past or present. Here violence is a contagious, dehumanising force that sweeps everybody up in its psychotic madness, especially the troubled young Manuel (Nicolas Duvauchelle incarnating a character who in the 1990s would have been played for Denis by Grégoire Colin). At the symbolic centre of this maelstrom is the fascinating, mostly silent, largely inactive, brooding figure of the Boxer (Isaach De Bankolé), who – like Ben Gazzara in one of Denis' favourite films, John Cassavetes' *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* – seems to be virtually a dead man from the first moment we glimpse him, his life draining away. He is in the process of passing over into the realm of myth, as a similarly wounded Johnny Depp did in Jarmusch's *Dead Man*.

Confident but somehow never completely satisfying, *White Material* seems to suffer from a tension between its status as a star vehicle (though Huppert is superb) and Denis' usual ensemble-driven proclivities. Some of the film's most powerful scenes – such as Manuel's brutalisation at the hands of two kids – come when the plot wanders away from Maria's point-of-view; Denis' relief at being able to stage her usual explorations off the linear track of the story is palpable. Yet these divagations never quite weave the sort of polyphony (in both image and sound) that – at its height (eg in *Beau Travail*) – brings Denis close in artistry to Terrence Malick; the fuller pattern that might have emerged from a freer treatment feels shrunken, truncated. An early scene is indicative of both the promise and the problems inherent in the project: Maria on a motorbike joins a long line of such movement images in Denis' work, but the depiction of the character's exhilaration (hands thrust in the air, wind in her face) tends to rather weary cliché.

Although *White Material* achieves the director's trademark dreamy fluidity – coaxing even the worst sticklers for narrative clarity to go with the flow and ignore strict demarcations between past and present, reality and fantasy – its structure isn't half as daring as, say, that of her 2004 film *The Intruder* (*L'Intrus*), where the images created the narrative, rather than vice versa. Denis does employ the casual, even brutal form of exposition that suits her best: crucial information is conveyed on the fly, in glimpsed details (the survival kits strewn on the ground after a helicopter passes) or mysteriously brief, unanchored insertions of voiceover commentary (as when two unidentified locals discuss the white population).

However, like all her films, *White Material* repays repeat viewings, and grows with them. Not only do the more obscure or offhand pieces of the plot make more sense a second or third time around, but the already thick mood deepens and expands. Denis is a master of rhythm – here, an oceanic, slow throb that's remarkably sustained over feature length – and of the fusion of image and music. Both in its overall structure and its incidental details, *White Material* admirably conveys the vision of a society in disarray, flying apart at every seam. In Denis' Africa, there really is no place like home.

Adrian Martin, *Sight and Sound*, July 2010