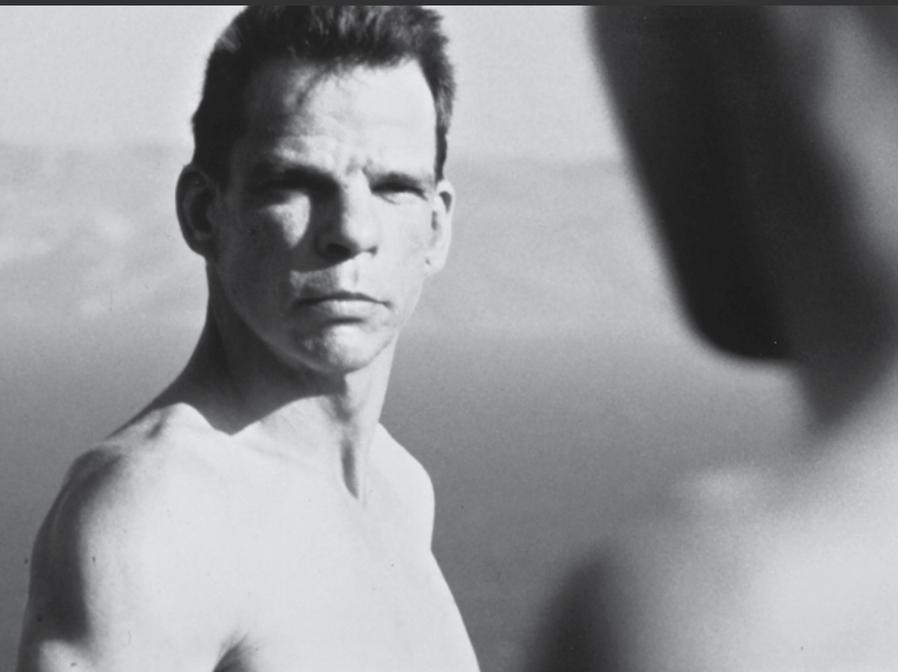


UNDER THE SKIN: THE FILMS OF CLAIRE DENIS



Beau travail, March 25, April 1 *Chocolat*, March 4
Photo courtesy New Yorker Films

The work of Claire Denis begins with what she calls “tactile intuition.” Her films feel their way through charged situations and complex relationships—cultural, familial, sexual—by attending to the textures and rhythms of the physical world and to the ways that people move through it. This is a corporeal cinema: Denis once asserted, “capturing bodies on film is the only thing that interests me.”

Born in Paris in 1948, Denis spent her childhood in various African nations where her father was a French colonial functionary. Several of her most acclaimed films, from her debut feature *Chocolat* to *Beau travail* and the recent *White Material*, are set in Africa, and a concern with colonialism and its aftereffects runs through much of her work. But her approach to this and other subjects is less political or even psychological than emotional and experiential; exposition is pared away, leaving impressions whose full meaning emerges only with the passage of time.

Denis served a long apprenticeship before directing her own films, beginning as an assistant on Dušan Makavejev's *Sweet Movie* (1974) and later working as an assistant director to Jim Jarmusch and Wim Wenders. This retrospective includes her films with those two directors, as well as the fruits of her long collaborations with cinematographer Agnès Godard, writer Jean-Pol Fargeau, and actor Alex Descas (whom she has described as her “muse”). Here is a chance to experience a body of work that both exerts and rewards alert observation.

Juliet Clark

CONTRIBUTING FILM NOTES WRITER

SERIES CURATED BY SUSAN OXTOBY. PFA WISHES TO THANK THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS FOR THEIR ASSISTANCE WITH THIS RETROSPECTIVE: HARRIS DEW, IFC CENTER, NEW YORK CITY; CULTURESFRANCE, FRENCH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, PARIS; DELPHINE SELLES, FRENCH CULTURAL SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO; JONATHAN HOWELL, NEW YORKER FILMS; SARAH FINKLEA AND BRIAN BELOVARAC, JANUS FILMS; JAKE PERLIN, THE FILM DESK; BRANDON PETERS, STRAND RELEASING; ANDREW TRACY, TIFF CINEMATHEQUE; AND PAUL RICHER, PYRAMIDE INTERNATIONAL.

FRIDAY MARCH 4

7:00 *White Material*

Claire Denis (France, 2009)

Denis's latest film returns to the West African setting of her first, *Chocolat*, but replaces the restraint of that period piece with an apocalyptic vision of the postcolonial present. Isabelle Huppert brings characteristic clenched ferocity to the role of Maria Vial, the proprietor of a coffee plantation in an unnamed country that is collapsing into civil war. Delusionally resolute in her attachment to her African home, Maria refuses to join other white residents who are fleeing to France. “Dirty whites . . . they don't deserve this beautiful land,” she says; but who does deserve it? The child soldiers swarming around the rebel known as the Boxer (Isaach de Bankolé)? Or Maria's own son, who awakens from privileged lassitude into a delirious racial fury? Shuffling anxiously beautiful images into a fragmented flashback structure, Denis suggests a vivid but unstable reality, as though in Maria's ruptured world, not only times but time itself had changed.—Juliet Clark

• Written by Denis, Marie N'Diaye. Photographed by Yves Cape. With Isabelle Huppert, Nicolas Duvauchelle, Isaach de Bankolé, William Nadytam. (102 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From IFC Films)

9:00 *Chocolat*

Claire Denis (France/W. Germany, 1988)

 BAM/PFA Student Committee Pick

For her first film, Denis re-created two lost worlds: colonial Cameroon in the 1950s, and the familiar yet foreign territory of childhood. Framed as the recollections of a grown woman, *Chocolat* draws on the director's own early years, and it has all the sensory acuity and strangeness of memory. The point-of-view character, pointedly named France, is the daughter of a colonial officer at a remote outpost; her closest companion is Protée (Isaach de Bankolé), the household's black “boy,” who serves not only as helper and protector but also as a vector for the white characters' various desires and delusions. The film's quiet beauty, in thrall to the landscape, could suggest a current of nostalgia, but Denis carefully complicates matters. The ending executes a graceful shift in perspective, reminding us that France is not the center of the universe.—Juliet Clark

• Written by Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Isaach de Bankolé, Giulia Boschi, François Cluzet, Jean-Claude Adelin. (105 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From The Film Desk)

SATURDAY MARCH 5

7:15 *Paris, Texas*

Wim Wenders (Claire Denis, assistant director, W. Germany/France, 1984)

Paris, Texas, aptly titled, evokes something foreign in the American experience. The film is inspired by Sam Shepard's *Motel Chronicles*—in particular, “the image of somebody leaving the freeway and walking straight into the desert,” according to director Wenders. That somebody is Harry Dean Stanton's Travis, who staggers into the film on returning from

nowhere, where he's been for a number of years. Travis tentatively reunites with his young son, Hunter, and together they hit the road in search of the boy's mother; the dream of making the family whole again finds its nightmare edge when Mom (Nastassja Kinski) is found working in a peep show. Still, Travis persists, reaching her on her own terms: through glass. Robby Müller's cinematography pursues a fantasy of the American West in capturing its more bizarre reality, much as Travis and Hunter pursue a fantasy of the American family amid the choked violence of the one they have.—Judy Bloch

• Written by Sam Shepard. Adapted by L. M. Kit Carson. Photographed by Robby Müller. With Harry Dean Stanton, Nastassja Kinski, Dean Stockwell, Aurore Clement. (145 mins, Color, 35mm, From Janus Films/Criterion Collection)

SUNDAY MARCH 6

3:00 *I Can't Sleep*

Claire Denis (France/Switzerland, 1994)

(*J'ai pas sommeil*). Denis's dispassionate approach to a Parisian murder-noir makes Claude Chabrol look like an emotional wreck. Daïga (Katerina Golubeva), having arrived from Lithuania with minimal French and had her hopes for a theatrical career quickly dashed, works as a chambermaid in a small hotel near Sacré Coeur. Camille (Richard Courcet), a black transvestite, carries on his affairs under the mothering eye of the hotel owner, while elsewhere in the *quartier*, Camille's brother Théo (Alex Descas), a jazz musician, has given up on Paris and threatens to return to Martinique with his child. With a thriving gay underground and a burgeoning immigrant population, the eighteenth arrondissement is also home to many old ladies who have lived there for ages. Everyone wonders who is killing and robbing them as they come home with their groceries—everyone but Camille and his lover. Based on the “Granny Killer” case of 1987, Denis's film opens up more riddles than it solves, mysteries of intention and desire.—Judy Bloch

• Written by Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Katerina Golubeva, Richard Courcet, Vincent Dupont, Alex Descas. (110 mins, In French and Russian with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, permission Pyramide International)

SUNDAY MARCH 20

3:00 *No Fear, No Die*

Claire Denis (France, 1990)

(*S'en fout la mort*). “All human beings, of whatever race or nationality or religious belief or ideology, will do anything and everything.” An epigraph from Chester Himes sounds an appropriate note of pulp philosophy for this underworld allegory, a stark and gritty follow-up to the stately *Chocolat*. Dah (Isaach de Bankolé) and Jocelyn (Alex Descas) are black immigrants in France hired by a white nightclub owner, Ardennes (Jean-Claude Brialy), to train roosters for illegal cockfights. Cooped up with the characters in dingy subterranean spaces, the camera captures the rituals of tenderness and balletic aggression that make up the birds' conditioning, along with the equally edgy dance among Jocelyn, Ardennes, and Ardennes's beautiful wife (Solveig Dommartin, of

Wings of Desire). Denis doesn't flinch in depicting brutality, toward either the cocks or their keepers. “Men, cocks: same thing,” says Dah; for both, life is a fight that can end only one way.—Juliet Clark

• Written by Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Isaach de Bankolé, Alex Descas, Solveig Dommartin, Christopher Buchholz. (91 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From Pathé)

FRIDAY MARCH 25

7:00 *Nénette and Boni*

Claire Denis (France, 1996)

(*Nénette et Boni*). Abandoned by their father and bereft of their mother who recently died, nineteen-year-old Boni (Grégoire Colin) and his younger sister Nénette (Alice Houré) are barely on speaking terms, with life or with each other. Boni, a pizza-maker in his better moments, has turned his mother's Marseilles apartment into a space for sexual fantasy—in fine French film form, he lusts after the baker's wife, buns and all, a woman whose good-natured sensuality is the polar opposite of his own. When Nénette runs away from boarding school, seven months pregnant, the siblings circle around each other like wary strays. As James Quandt put it, “*Les enfants terribles* [are] faced with the terrifying prospect of becoming *les parents terribles*.” *Nénette and Boni* anticipates *Beau travail* in its palette of blinding white sunlight and striking blues. It may be the Mediterranean, but as the song says, “tiny tears make up an ocean.”—Judy Bloch

• Written by Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Grégoire Colin, Alice Houré, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, Vincent Gallo. (103 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From Strand Releasing)

9:00 *Beau travail*

Claire Denis (France, 1999)

(*Good Work*). A story of French Legionnaires isolated in a blisteringly beautiful African setting (Djibouti and surrounds), *Beau travail* evokes Camus's *The Stranger* as much as it does Melville's *Billy Budd*, on which it is abstractly based. This is the Legion of the 1990s, superfluous to anything but its almost spiritual rituals of loyalty and rigor. The rigor is played out in dancelike exercises and in simple activities like the pressing of a uniform into elegant creases. But loyalty, as in Melville, is a complex of suppressed eroticism and violence, as Sgt. Galoup (Denis Lavant) indulges a paranoid, irrational hatred for a beautiful young recruit, Sentain (Grégoire Colin), who he imagines will kill the commanding officer, Forester (Michel Subor). In this film Denis effectively hypnotizes us, transforming what is, after all, a detachment of unemployed boys who have fled France for a colonial netherworld—a dream long since awakened from—into a dance of beauty, passion, and sadness. Nice work, if you can get it.—Judy Bloch

Beau travail is repeated on Friday, April 1.

• Written by Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau, inspired by the novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* by Herman Melville. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Denis Lavant, Michel Subor, Grégoire Colin, Richard Courcet. (90 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, permission Europe Images International)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP-LEFT
Nénette and Boni, March 25
The Intruder, April 8, 9
I Can't Sleep, March 6
35 Shots of Rum, April 16

SATURDAY MARCH 26

8:30 **Down by Law**

Jim Jarmusch (Claire Denis, assistant director, U.S., 1986)

DJ Zack (Tom Waits) and pimp Jack (John Lurie) have the hep con blues. Framed for crimes they would be too slack to commit, they land in a shared cell in Orleans Parish Prison. Then Roberto comes along. This inexplicable, irrepressible naïf (Roberto Benigni, then little known in the United States), an Italian magpie of American idioms, transports Jarmusch's self-described "neo-Beat noir comedy" into the realm of fractured fairy tale. Soon Jack, Zack, and Bob are off on a picaresque jailbreak journey, drifting in circles through the bayou toward a happy ending "like in a book for children" . . . kind of. Lensed in gorgeous black and white by Robby Müller, the film was shot on location around New Orleans, but as Luc Sante wrote, "the actual setting is no more Louisiana than the setting of *Macao* is Macao. *Down by Law* takes place in the land of the imagination, in the province of the movies."—Juliet Clark

• Written by Jarmusch. Photographed by Robby Müller. With Tom Waits, John Lurie, Roberto Benigni, Ellen Barkin. (107 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Janus Films/Criterion Collection)

FRIDAY APRIL 1

7:00 **Beau travail**

Claire Denis (France, 1999)

Please see Friday, March 25.

8:50 **Trouble Every Day**

Claire Denis (France, 2001)

A portrait of devouring passion, *Trouble Every Day* is Denis's most troubling work—two audience members reportedly fainted at its Cannes premiere—but its potency derives less from its explicit images than from the sincerity with which it pursues its carnal conceit. Léo (Alex Descas), a doctor, is both caregiver and captor to his wife Coré (Béatrice Dalle, aptly nicknamed La Grande Bouche), who suffers from a strange and deadly sexual affliction. Meanwhile, in a Parisian honeymoon suite, American scientist Shane (Vincent Gallo) keeps his virginal bride (Tricia Vessey) at bay as he attempts to manage his own dangerous appetites. Connections between the two couples slowly emerge, pointing back in time toward an unspeakable experiment in a jungle in Guyana. Denis filters the tropes of vampire films and mad science through her own oblique and ultimately romantic point of view in what she stubbornly called "a naive and innocent film."—Juliet Clark

• Written by Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Vincent Gallo, Tricia Vessey, Béatrice Dalle, Alex Descas. (101 mins, In English and French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From Wild Bunch)

SATURDAY APRIL 2

8:30 **Wings of Desire**

Wim Wenders (Claire Denis, assistant director, W. Germany, 1988)

(*Der Himmel über Berlin*). *Wings of Desire*, written in collaboration with Peter Handke and based on Wenders's reading of Rilke, posits two sad and sober trench coat-clad angels whose beat is Berlin. Played by Bruno Ganz, at his most intensely human, and Otto Sander, these seraphim receive the thoughts of the humans among whom they mingle. Unseen, but not entirely unnoticed, and with a tender gravity, they cradle, comfort, bear witness, relish absurdity, cherish thoughts. The soundtrack is abuzz with the collective stream-of-consciousness of a city, while Henri Alékan's camera glides through the ether separating heaven and earth. Among the mortals the angels encounter are an aging writer absorbed in memories of a devastated Germany; an actor (Peter Falk) on location shooting a film about the Nazi era; and a lovely, lonely trapeze artist (Solveig Dommartin) for whom Ganz's angel finally falls. Heaven can wait.—Judy Bloch

Wings of Desire is repeated on April 20 as part of the **Film 50: History of Cinema** series.

• Written by Wenders, Peter Handke. Photographed by Henri Alékan. With Bruno Ganz, Solveig Dommartin, Otto Sander, Curt Bois. (130 mins, In English and German with English subtitles, B&W/Color, 35mm, From Janus Films/Criterion Collection)

FRIDAY APRIL 8

6:30 **The Intruder**

Claire Denis (France/S. Korea, 2004)

(*L'intrus*). Inspired by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's short autobiographical reflection on his heart transplant and building around the eloquently brooding presence of Michel Subor, Denis doesn't so much tell the story of Subor's Louis as she feels and hacks her way around its contours and tunnels into its core. This is a film about longing on the deepest level imaginable—for a son on the other side of the world and for a life that is always elsewhere. As Denis follows Louis from the French Alps to Geneva to Pusan to Polynesia in search of the child who has grown up without him, she maintains an extremely delicate if not precarious balance between presence and absence: the sheer presence of the physical world, of mountains, lakes, forests, beaches, and oceans; and the absence of completeness, the feeling that for Louis, wholeness will always be a continent away.—Kent Jones, SIFF 2005

The Intruder is repeated on Saturday, April 9.

• Written by Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Michel Subor, Grégoire Colin, Katia Golubeva, Bambou. (130 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From Pyramide International)

9:00 **U.S. Go Home**

Claire Denis/Cédric Kahn (France, 1994)

"The great unseen Claire Denis film" (Harvard Film Archive), *U.S. Go Home* is Denis's entry in the series *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge*, for which nine directors were invited to explore their recollections of French adolescence. Featuring music by Eric Burdon and the Animals, the Yardbirds, and other icons of Denis's midsixties youth, the film is centered on a dance party near a U.S. military base on the outskirts of Paris, where teens play out their ambivalence about American culture and about the opposite sex.

• Written by Denis, Anne Wiazemsky. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Alice Hourri, Jessica Tharaud, Grégoire Colin, Martine Gautier. (58 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, Beta SP, permission Arte)

Followed by:

Claire Denis: The Wanderer

Sébastien Lifshitz (France, 1996)

(*Claire Denis: La vagabonde*). In an arrestingly filmed interview (with the questions omitted), Denis offers a spirited and insightful discussion of her films and career. Exploring her first few films in illuminating detail, she also explains her fascinating ideas about filmmaking itself—lighting, sound, editing—and about such other filmmakers as Renoir and Ozu.—Harvard Film Archive

• (50 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, Beta SP, From CulturesFrance)

• (Total running time: 108 mins)

SATURDAY APRIL 9

8:30 **The Intruder**

Claire Denis (France/Korea, 2004)

Please see Friday, April 8.

FRIDAY APRIL 15

7:00 **Friday Night**

Claire Denis (France, 2002)

(*Vendredi soir*). Nightfall in Paris: Laure (Valérie Lemercier) finishes packing and gets in her car. Tomorrow she'll move in with her boyfriend; tonight she'll have dinner with friends. Or . . . Denis's graceful and seductive tale of a one-night affair is an ode to possibility, imagining what can happen when an ordinary woman is granted an unexpected moment of erotic opportunity. What might have been a flimsy romantic fantasy is enriched by Denis's sensitive observation of small details, and by moments when those details seem to flicker between external reality and Laure's interior perceptions. *Friday Night* was adapted from a novel by Emmanuèle Bernheim; Denis's characterization of the book applies equally to the adaptation: "A manner so precise, so meticulous, which contains in the same phrase both the conscious and the unconscious . . . that which is experienced and that which is desired."—Juliet Clark

• Written by Denis, Emmanuèle Bernheim, from the novel by Bernheim. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Valérie Lemercier, Vincent Lindon, Héliène de Saint-Père, Grégoire Colin. (90 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From Pathé)

8:50 **Vers Mathilde**

Claire Denis (France, 2005)

Vers Mathilde documents Denis's encounter with Mathilde Monnier, the head of the Centre Chorégraphique National de Montpellier and France's foremost contemporary choreographer. This largely unseen dance documentary is classic Denis, but a freer, more spontaneous Denis, making it a must for both dance fans and cinephiles. . . . *Vers Mathilde* is a portrait of Monnier in action, working on an experimental dance piece. But more than that, the film captures a sensuous pas-de-deux between Denis and Monnier, two virtuosic artists whose strong affinities for one another produce a tremulous tension that hovers beneath the film's grainy surface. . . . As Denis advances *vers* Mathilde, a charming, unscripted, inspired, and sexy film emerges, with a number of astonishing images to add to the filmmaker's coveted collection. Featuring music by PJ Harvey. —Cinematheque Ontario

• Photographed by Agnès Godard, Héliène Louvant. (84 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, DVD)

Preceded by short:

Pour Ushari Ahmed Mahmoud! (Claire Denis, France, 1991). Made for Amnesty International and dedicated to a Sudanese political prisoner, the film contemplates themes of repression and exile through a song by Alain Souchon. (4 mins, B&W, Beta SP)

• (Total running time: 88 mins, From CulturesFrance)

SATURDAY APRIL 16

8:40 **35 Shots of Rum**

Claire Denis (France, 2008)

(*35 rhums*). This deeply emotional yet light-of-touch *conte* evokes nothing so much as Eric Rohmer in his "seasons" quartet as it follows a small circle of black Parisians and their friends in a roundelay of relationships that touches on almost every kind of love there is. Lionel (Alex Descas), a train engineer, shares an apartment with his daughter Jo (Mati Diop), a university student. In the same building live a taxi driver (Nicole Dogué) and a young man who comes and goes (Grégoire Colin). Together, they are a kind of family. We figure out their roles and relationships only gradually as Denis leaves crumbs for us to follow on a narrative path, and that is one of the pleasures of this extraordinarily pleasurable film made up of small moments, of looks and silences, of physicality and pensiveness. Agnès Godard's cinematography richly limns an interior architecture in which objects take on an Ozu-like delicacy and immediacy, and uses train tracks to propel the story into the out-of-doors and, eventually, the future, as father and daughter face the inevitable: her independence. —Judy Bloch

• Written by Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau. Photographed by Agnès Godard. With Alex Descas, Mati Diop, Grégoire Colin, Nicole Dogué. (100 mins, In French with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From Cinema Guild)