

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

SUNDAY
DECEMBER 8, 2019
2 PM • WHITNEY
HUMANITIES CENTER

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.

CHOCOLAT



"When I was making CHOCOLAT I think that I had a desire to express a certain guilt I felt as a child raised in a colonial world. When the film was completed I was asked to write a piece on it for the press booklet. Unsure of what to write, I found an introduction to an anthology of Black literature and poetry by Jean-Paul Sartre which suggested that for three thousand years the official view of the world had been a white view and he now welcomed an alternative—the view from those who had been watched, what they saw when they looked at us, the white Europeans. I put this in the booklet because I thought that there was very little else I could say: knowing I was white, I tried to be honest in admitting that CHOCOLAT is essentially a white view of the 'other.'"

— Claire Denis



Claire Denis, born in Paris in 1948, moved with her mother to Cameroon, where her father was working as an administrator in the French colonial government, when she was eight weeks old. For the next thirteen years, she lived in various West and East African territories that would, after decolonization, become Burkina Faso, Djibouti, and Mali. When Denis and her sister contracted polio at thirteen, the family moved back to a Paris suburb, back home to a country she hardly knew.

After a frustrating stint studying economics, Denis decided to enroll at the prestigious film school IDHEC (now known as La Fémis). After graduating in 1972, she began working as an assistant director to a number of well-known filmmakers including Jacques Rivette, Costa-Gavras, and Dusan Makavejev, as well as Wim Wenders (on *PARIS, TEXAS* and *WINGS OF DESIRE*) and Jim Jarmusch (on *DOWN BY LAW*). While shooting in the expansive desert locations for Wenders' *PARIS, TEXAS* in 1984, Denis was reminded of the vistas of her childhood in Cameroon, and the inspiration for *CHOCOLAT*, her debut feature film, was born.

CHOCOLAT, the story of a young French girl living with her family in Cameroon and her complicated relationship with the family's "boy," or African house servant, is, for all of its outward connections to her upbringing, not autobiographical, according to Denis. "My parents would certainly not have had someone serve them meals. I wasn't raised like that," she said in a 2018 interview in *The New Yorker*. "I was raised in a world that probably never actually existed, the world my parents hoped for...where there was no separation between people. I was raised in a dreamland."

The story owes some inspiration to a novel by the Cameroonian writer Ferdinand Oyono called *Une vie de boy* (1956), (known as *Houseboy* in English). The novel is presented as the found journals of Toundi, who is, like the character Protée in *CHOCOLAT*, a house servant for a colonial administrator. Denis has described the book as seminal to her adolescent years, and spoken of her film as "a bit like the memory of that book." The complicated relationship between the household and the servant, and the ever-changing dynamics of dependence and invisibility, feature prominently in both Oyono's book and Denis's film.

Describing her process for making *CHOCOLAT*, Denis said in a contemporary interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, "It was important to try to create a grammar for the story you want to tell. I was not looking for a style I could use on every film. I was interested in creating the feeling of a time that has gone—the feeling you are having a daydream. I was trying to create something with images seen from a certain distance."

CHOCOLAT was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and won Denis the César for Best First Work. The film began a thirty-plus year career filled with critically acclaimed films including *BEAU TRAVAIL* (1999), *TROUBLE EVERY DAY* (2001), *35 SHOTS OF RUM* (2008), and *WHITE MATERIAL* (2009), a film also focused on the experience of a European female protagonist in Africa. Denis's most recent film, also her English language debut, is *HIGH LIFE* (2018), a drama set in space starring Juliette Binoche and Robert Pattinson.

DIRECTED BY **CLAIRE DENIS**

SCREENPLAY BY **CLAIRE DENIS** AND
JEAN-POL FARGEAU

PRODUCED BY **CAROLINE PRODUCTIONS,**
CERITO FILMS, AND MK2 PRODUCTIONS
(1988) 105 MINS.

STARRING **ISAACH DE BANKOLÉ,**
GIULIA BOSCHI, FRANÇOIS CLUZET,
JEAN-CLAUDE ADELIN, LAURENT
ARNAL, JEAN BEDIÈBE, JEAN-QUENTIN
CHATELAIN, AND KENNETH CRANHAM

DID YOU KNOW: INITIALLY, THE IDEA FOR *CHOCOLAT* BEGAN AS A STORY ABOUT AFRICAN AMERICAN GIS WHO MOVED TO AFRICA AFTER THE VIETNAM WAR. WHILE THE STORYLINE EVOLVED SIGNIFICANTLY AS PRODUCTION BEGAN, THE ELEMENT OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPATRIATE IN AFRICA DOES APPEAR IN THE FRAMING NARRATIVE OF THE FINISHED FILM.

NEXT UP: START THE NEW YEAR WITH THE PREMIERE OF THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE'S NEWLY ACQUIRED VINTAGE PRINT OF ORSON WELLES' REMARKABLE DEBUT, *CITIZEN KANE*. COME SEE WHY THE FILM HAS SAT ATOP THE LIST OF GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME, **TUESDAY, JANUARY 14, 2020, AT 7PM.**