



White Material

Director: Claire Denis
Country: France
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A review by Manholan Dargis for *The New York Times*:

Early in Claire Denis's powerful, agonized film "White Material," you see a woman in a short pink dress, Maria — played by a sublime Isabelle Huppert — hanging off the back of a bus. The setting is a contemporary unnamed African country being torn to pieces by government troops, marauding rebels and the enduring ravages of European colonialism. As she holds on tight, her short-sleeved dress fluttering, the camera moves in close enough for you to see the muscles in Ms. Huppert's thin arms popping, straining with the terrific effort that encapsulates the will to survive.

Ms. Denis has an extraordinary gift for finding the perfect image that expresses her ideas, the cinematic equivalent of what Flaubert called *le mot juste*. At her best, as in "Beau Travail" (1999), her radiant retelling of Melville's "Billy Budd," the images convey her ideas with more precision than reams of scripted dialogue could. The same holds true of "White Material," a striking film filled with images that sometimes reveal their full meaning only when their beauty curdles in the chain of signification, as in the seemingly inconsequential shot of Maria's light hair that inexorably leads to a scene of a man shaving his head and violently stuffing his blond hair into the mouth of a protesting black woman.

But before that horror there is the nightmarish image of running dogs and the unnerving scene of a man caught in an inferno, an opening vision to which the film later returns. When Maria first enters the film, she's walking in a dusty rural landscape and vainly trying to wave down a fast-moving car. The expression on her face is both terrifying and terrified, and her features look harshly arranged — lips pursed into a lopsided oval, brow bunched, red-lined eyes fixed — as if she had been broken by some unspoken anguish and hastily glued together. Soon after, she hitches a ride on the bus and begins her journey toward the coffee plantation she calls home, a passage Ms. Denis interweaves with flashbacks to the recent past.

It takes a little time to adjust to this dual movement forward (toward home) and back (into the past), if only because it makes it tricky to get a firm footing in the story. Yet this form works because Maria initially appears as unmoored by what is happening as you are. In this sense, the flashbacks, most of which are



from her point of view, serve as fragments of a puzzle that you slowly piece together, at least in part. You discover her fierce dedication to the plantation, and you become acquainted with her former husband, André (Christophe Lambert); her adored grown son, Manuel (Nicolas Duvauchelle); and the plantation patriarch, Henri (Michel Subor). In time, both you and Maria learn the costs of her ferocious loves.

The price proves lethally high. In some crucial respects, "White Material" is a specific film about white Europeans who, being fully integrated into their African home, insist on the privileges of patrimony, including the right to exploit the land and its people. Though pale as milk, Maria contemptuously refers to "dirty whites," and her son, now perhaps in his early 20s, was born in Africa. Yet while he is a native son, the country "doesn't like him," as an African man tells Maria, and neither does it like her. If she doesn't seem to grasp this, it's

because she seems to think that her deep, rapturous feeling for the country on which she's staked a claim is enough to inoculate her. She isn't a dirty white, though for some she is.

"White Material" is very much a companion piece to "Chocolat," Ms. Denis's 1988 directorial debut. That lush, more straightforward film is set in Cameroon in the 1950s, during the waning years of French colonial rule, a subject Ms. Denis, the daughter of a French official, knows intimately, having grown up in Francophone African countries. "Chocolat" centers on the relationship between the young white daughter of a French district officer and the African man, Protée (Isaach De Bankolé), who works as the family's house "boy." Ms. Denis doesn't pretend to speak for the African servant, who remains opaque, but she does insist on showing his point of view — we watch him watching the whites — because she knows that this story isn't hers alone.

Mr. De Bankolé has a small role in the new film as a wounded, romanticized rebel soldier called the Boxer who takes refuge at the coffee plantation. Maria offers him help, but she barely talks to him, so preoccupied is she with getting her crop of beans harvested. Most of the plantation's workers have understandably fled (and Maria's ex wants to do the same), and both the army and the rebels, including a ragtag band of child soldiers, are fast approaching from different angles. The utopian promise of African liberation that reverberated throughout "Chocolat" has been replaced by the devastations of postcolonialism. Power has partly moved from white hands to black, yet much remains the same, including terror.

For the most part, terror creeps through this film quietly, sneaking through tall grass, slipping into buildings and moving with increasing tension among the characters. Eventually, Ms. Denis brings the whole thing to a shocking end with a death blow that is as blunt in its execution as it is in its larger historical meaning. But before then, she shows you an image of such astonishing poignancy and moral clarity that it will haunt you long after the film ends: a handful of child soldiers sleeping in a rumpled bed among scattered stuffed animals. With grave tenderness, Ms. Denis reminds us that these murderous, tragically lost boys and girls are still children, a gesture that doesn't restore their humanity — which she has no right to restore — so much as remind you of the humanity that's so easily forgotten.

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