



The Clouds of Sils Maria
Director: Olivier Assayas
Country: Switzerland/France
Date: 2014



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A review by Robbie Collin for *The Daily Telegraph*:

On an autumn morning in the centre of the Swiss Alps, when the temperature and humidity are just right, hillwalkers might catch a glimpse of the Maloja Snake. This isn't some mythical beast, but a strange cloud formation that slips up, serpent-like, from the Italian lakes and pours along the mountain pass by the village of Sils Maria, before dissipating on the lower valley slopes.



We spend most of *Clouds of Sils Maria*, the complex, bewitching and fearlessly intelligent new film from Olivier Assayas, waiting for a glimpse of this cloud-creature, and though Assayas makes us wait for it, the skies start greying over early.

As the film opens, we see Maria Enders (Juliette Binoche) is a respected actress travelling by train to Sils Maria, to collect an award on behalf of a friend, a reclusive, Ingmar Bergman-like playwright. By her side is Valentine (Kristen Stewart), Maria's smart and devoted personal assistant, who coolly wafts away a swarm of mobile phone calls while her boss composes herself in a private compartment.

Maria owes this playwright everything. He wrote the play that made her a star in her early Twenties, in which she took the role of Sigrid, a young temptress who seduces then abandons Helena, her older employer. Now a revival performance is planned for London, with Maria cast in the older woman role. Her young replacement is Jo-Ann Ellis (Chloë Grace Moretz), a wildly popular actress just out of her teens whose latest superhero film is going nuclear.

Making the transition from bewitcher to bewitched is difficult for Maria, and ties in with her fears of growing older and working in an industry she no longer fully understands. What's more, the play no longer seems as exciting or convincing as it did 20 years ago.

"I'm Sigrid, and I want to stay Sigrid," she says, as she and Valentine rehearse the script at her chalet in the mountains. But that's not the direction in which fame runs. Stardom is an illusion that swells up from nowhere, glides along wondrously for a while, then vanishes into the air. The title of this fame-bestowing, mortality-marking play? It's Maloja Snake, of course.

Much as he did in 1996's *Irma Vep*, Assayas is playing an intricate game on many levels here: try to imagine what the work-in-progress screenplay must have looked like and you end up picturing something not unlike the multi-storey chessboard from *Star Trek*. Stewart's starring role in the *Twilight* Saga would make her the intuitive choice to play Jo-Ann, but Assayas is more interested in tickling reality than reflecting it, and he allows Stewart, via this brilliantly written character, to step back and observe stardom from the edge of the bubble.

"It's celebrity news – it's fun," she shrugs, when Maria winces at the contents of a gossip website. Later, she mutters dismissively about a *Twilight*-like fantasy film that "had werewolves...for some reason."

The lines between life and play are mesmerisingly blurred. The film often drops in on scenes mid-rehearsal, and it takes you a few seconds to realise that Maria and Valentine's 'conversation' – which all often reflects their own strikingly intimate relationship – isn't to be taken at face value. There's some fun, Birdman-like commentary on the current state of film-acting too: Maria turns down a role in the new X-Men film because she's "sick of hanging from wires and working in front of green-screens", and later rolls her eyes at Jo-Ann's latest 3D science-fiction adventure, while Valentine watches rapt.

Although the premise of *Clouds of Sils Maria* recalls *All About Eve*, with Bette Davis's ageing Broadway star being usurped by the younger, brighter Ann Baxter, it has more in common with the great, female-driven films about identities in flux: Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Bergman's *Persona*, David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*.



Binoche plays her role with elegance and melancholic wit – her character slips between fact and fiction in a way that has something in common with her role in Abbas Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* – but it's entirely fitting that she's outshone on this occasion by her younger co-star. Stewart won a César – a French Oscar – for her performance here, and it's her best by some distance to date. This is the kind of ravishingly smart, liltily beautiful film you assume isn't being made any more. It is. Give it your time. You'll be amply rewarded.

From: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/clouds-of-sils-maria/review/>