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Black Camera, Volume 10, Number 1, Fall 2018, pp. 144-155 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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# Close-Up: On the Colony's Postcolony Encounter in Claire Denis's *Chocolat* and *White Material*

GALLERY: Poster Art as Cultural Labor in the Cinematic Archive of Claire Denis

Michael T. Martin



Figure 1. Claire Denis. Courtesy of the BFC/A.

*The history of film production runs in fascinating parallel to the history of film.*

—DAVE KEHR, "STILL IMAGES PROMOTING MOVING PICTURES"<sup>1</sup>

Unlike its functions and deployment, the film poster has hardly changed during the past century. Remarkably, the standard measure persists—27" x 41"—although sizes vary in correspondence to the number of "sheets" in a poster. "Earliest posters," contends Dave Kehr, "emphasized

Michael T. Martin, "Close-Up: On the Colony's Postcolony Encounter in Claire Denis's *Chocolat* and *White Material*: GALLERY: Poster Art as Cultural Labor in the Cinematographic Archive of Claire Denis" *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 10, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 144–155, doi: 10.2979/blackcamera.10.1.08

the act of movie-going itself, showing rapturous audiences in front of giant screens” and the “actual content of the films mattered little...”<sup>2</sup>

As posters vary in their intervention in every day consumer culture, they take on distinctive functions for specific audiences, and like other forms of mediation, they engage with the intersectionality and cultural discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., as well as the unconscious and the needs it harbors and drives. In doing so, a poster may be legible but not necessarily intelligible and evoke associations that mask or simplistically frame assumptions about the social world.

Broadly speaking, the efficacy of a poster—a movie poster—pivots on iconic images and gestures, and such formal features as composition, scale and aesthetic elements, among other representational factors. An art form, it must appeal to the eye in order to evoke interest in its subject much like what Roland Barthes refers to as the *punctum* of an image that at once commands the viewer’s eye and subjective association.

Apart from their commercial utility, movie posters call attention to themselves as they signify events and facts they purport to represent. In the hands of a skillful illustrator or graphic artist, they promote ideas and associations with all manner of things and events, and alter or reinforce taste and consumption.

During moments of civil conflict and war, a poster’s salience and utility can be especially critical, if not decisive, depicting the tumult, displacement and resistance occasioned by such events. In a 2011 exhibit on Iranian posters held at the Indiana University Art Museum, Elizabeth Rauh claimed that “Perhaps more so than at any other moment in recent history, posters served as powerful modalities for mobilization and communication during the Iranian Revolution (1979) and Iran-Iraq War (1980–88).”<sup>3</sup>

In this regard, the deployment of posters on behalf of “revolutionary” mobilizations labor to transform consciousness and transformational processes. The visual language can vary stylistically from abstract constructivist to traditional and the folkloristic. Some posters during the Russian and Iranian revolutions illustrate these styles.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Cuba—where, in the first decade of the post-revolutionary period, an “extraordinary renaissance of poster art” occurred—their function, David Kunzle argues, was not only to transmit ideological messages but also to serve as “embellishments of the film and of the streets, where they were posted on specifically designed ‘paraguas.’”<sup>5</sup>

To illustrate, consider these examples of protest posters:

- The role of the Atelier Populaire (“Popular Workshop”) in support of the anti-capitalist strikes, occupations and police repression in France during the May 1968 uprising and its enduring

resonance today against police brutality in the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>6</sup>

- The deployment of protest posters during the first Intifada that foregrounded the resistance and aspirations of the Palestinian people against the Israeli “Occupied Homeland.”<sup>7</sup>

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This gallery, comprising of select posters and DVD jacket covers of Claire Denis’s film oeuvre,<sup>8</sup> foregrounds the organizing thematics of this uncompromising filmmaker whose sustained interrogation of postcolonial subjectivities—cosmopolitan and otherwise—is legendary and, arguably, without equal among cineastes.

Each poster references a film and has its own story to narrate. Each—we could say—is self-reflexive, questioning itself as it depicts the film it claims to represent. And each is a constituent of a film’s promotional and exhibition history.

Determining a poster’s message and purpose involves interrogating its formal features and utterances, written and visual, as well as the subliminal concerns it provokes in the viewer’s relationship to the story, its protagonists, and the circumstances that drive the narrative.

Along these lines of inquiry two fundamental questions pertain to Denis’s approach to postcoloniality and its denizens: Who is the *protagonist* and for whom does she/he speak? And what is the *circumstance* of their story? Not unrelated and of importance, too, is the *setting* for the story. By “who,” I mean the central characters in the narrative; by *setting* is inferred the physical *space* the characters inhabit that evokes *place* in the story; while *circumstance* constitutes the situation that drives the story.

Such organizing principles I think enable greater specificity for the analysis of film posters, including such relational questions as

- What audience is the poster intended for?
- What assumptions about its audience does it infer?
- Does it signify place in time?
- Does it conflate the past in the present?
- Is the poster in correspondence with the film?
- What purpose are multiple renderings of the film in poster designs?
- Are there distinct ideological and commercial interests at play that determine poster designs on behalf of the filmmaker, producer, distributor; and the country or region where the film is exhibited

to audiences with distinct tastes, expectations and cultural orientations?

- What other contextual factors may affect the posters' significations?

Consider these film posters in the gallery in what I describe to as a photo essay, primarily of *Chocolat* (1988) and *White Material* (2009) and the queries they invite and provoke in their renderings of the films they claim to represent. The first two groupings of film posters engage directly with the subject of this Close-Up, "On the Colony's Postcolony Encounter in Claire Denis's *Chocolat* and *White Material*"; while the other two elaborate Denis's take and approach to masculinity in *Beau Travail* ("Good Work," 1999) and in *35 Rhums* (*35 Shots of Rum*, 2008), quotidian familial and social relations in multi-racial/ethnic metropolitan France.

## Chocolat

Examine these five posters of *Chocolat*, Denis's first feature. Does the image in "fig. a" conflate historical time and suggest [cultural] displacement in the juxtaposition of the mask and the contemporaneously attired woman? Does it foreground the counterpoint and play on tradition and modernity? What other intersectionalities—gendered and raced—are suggested by this poster? Is the woman in the frame, a nod to the autobiographical? Are other correspondences evidenced in this poster: location (Africa)? Do mask and sunglasses share similar purpose? What do they signify? By what means are [cultural] hybridity inferred in the poster? And does it allude to the *circumstance*, *place*, and *setting* in the story?

Unlike poster a, posters b and c insinuate other protagonists in the visual frame: a black man sparsely clad in tee shirt and shorts in b and, in c, a man (what man?), sitting in a crouched position next to a child (race unknown). In the background, a landscape, seemingly comprising a savannah and mountain, suggesting the physical *setting* for the story. But the *circumstance* of the characters and under what conditions are unclear? Is this uncertainty a feature of the marketing strategy of the distributor?

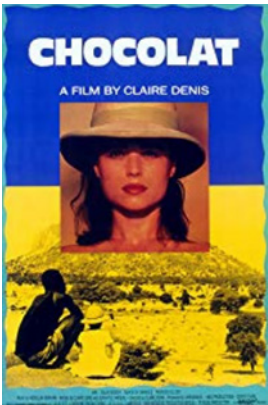
Markers of circumstance, however, are not entirely absent here and are alluded to by the race and presence of the woman in the foreground of poster b, and at the epi-center of poster c. Given the centrality of such positioning, are we to presume that she is the central character in *Chocolat*? And the child sitting beside the man in poster c (the same man in b?), does her attire—dress and hat—strongly point to her race (white) and privileged position



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)

Figure 2. *Chocolat*.

in relationship to the slightly clad [black] man sitting beside her? Is he her servant, guardian, plaything, confidant—or all of the above? Is he the foreigner or she—the child—in this unknown landscape? What is the child's relationship, if any, to the woman foreground in both these posters? Is the child the adult and, if so, does poster c, cohere two distinct temporal moments of the child/woman's life? The significance, however, of their *circumstance* eludes us in this sub-set of posters.

Unlike poster a, posters d and e insinuate another element in the visual language of *Chocolat*. Here, the protagonists are adults, unfettered by the child's witness. They are differentiated, too, by race and gender, and perhaps, sexuality. Moreover, they mutually evoke desire, although repressed in the violence of transgressing racial and class boundaries. Recall that the woman featured in both posters: her location in front of the man, can be read as superordinate among the two. One reading implies that the power between them favors her and that the relationship is contingent by class and the authority invested in whiteness. Note, too, the man's attire appears as that of a domestic servant and enables him to be in close physical proximity to the woman (the Madame of the house). Consider their distinct gazes: the woman aware of the man's eyes directed at her reflected in the off-screen mirror, as he buttons her dress. Is this a behavior expressive of intimacy between lovers or service between colonizer/colonized? Her gaze, which appears direct and curiously tense, gestures him to suspend in the moment their public and formal roles and concede to their shared desire, while his gaze seemingly expresses the humiliation and anger of his subordination as the servant. In this moment, each appears unable to step-out of their bounded space, she daring, if only figuratively, to elide the prohibitions they must both conform to and publicly perform as master and servant.

What can we infer about the adult characters in these posters? Is it suggested that the [white] woman's station in the [colonial] order of things has authority over the [black] man's? That sexual desire, for which she invites, is more consequential—in punitive terms—for him than for her. That, while in the public sphere, the unequal relationship between them is structural and immutable, its private registers are manifestly transgressive by desire, longing and anger in the violence of denial and subordination. And of the child who inhabits this space—their shared public space—is unable to comprehend the cause and circumstance of the tension between the adults she bears witness to, as she is observing them perform their ascribed and proscribed roles.

Lastly, while the posters themselves lack specificity, regarding the *circumstance*, *place* and *setting* of the story, they enable us to visually discern and consider the interiority of the adult characters based on their subject positions and status as I have suggested. And contrary to Denis's claim that the man (Protée) depicted in the posters is the main character (see interview

with Denis in this close-up), such film posters suggest otherwise and, in so doing, are at odds with the written text and storyline of *Chocolat* and for which we ask why?

White Material

As enigmatic, as these three posters of *White Material* (2009) are, they are also unsettling. They too intimate displacement, though seemingly of a



Figure 3. (a) Maria, forest in background, *White Material*; (b) Maria and child soldier, Criterion Collection cover, *White Material*; (c) Maria on road, *White Material*.

different kind; they invite audiences—White? Female? Metropolitan?—to consider why. In the background of the poster a, devoid of people beneath the forest canopy and expanse, the protagonist [Maria] appears in the foreground, her distress palpable in the frame, for which we have no identifiable signs to discern her circumstance, indeed fate. Yet, like posters b and c of *Chocolat*, it evokes the image of a foreigner in an unknown landscape and setting. Is the female character in *Chocolat* the same character—fast-forward—in *White Material*? Is the autobiographical a subtext of *White Material* as it is in *Chocolat*? Is the character fixed or transient in time and space? Is her anguish, fear and determination rendered evident in these posters, even in poster b, where in the background appears, militantly, a black youth?<sup>9</sup> What are we to make of fig. b, implicating a second character in the frame and story; a character marked by race and distinct by his fist closed and raised in defiance. Defiance against whom: the [white] woman in the foreground that he appears to be looking at? Against someone else or some other thing: a system of rule where race matters; a condition of civil conflict occasioned by social inequality and exploitation? In each of the three images, the woman appears in crisis, alone to sort through her situation and fate. And that precisely is one such subtext in *White Material* that these images labor to signify, unlike those that misrepresent who the protagonist is in *Chocolat*.

## Beau Travail

Here, three images, comprising DVD and poster covers of *Beau Travail*, contrast designs and the significations suggested by the protagonists. In fig. a, the protagonist is foregrounded in relation to the other men exercising in the background. Their physicality and stance are precise, coordinated, aggressive, and indeed bellicose. In fig. b, two men are featured, one whose gaze is on the other, while the other looks away pensively toward something or someone else. Note that both are in focus; one reading suggests they are adversaries of equal importance in the story. In fig c, the two protagonists appear in counterpoint, as they face off, alluding to an adversarial relationship marked by tension and defiance. Defiance against what? Authority, homoerotic overtures, repressed desire in what appears a solely male environ where performing masculinity is spectacle. Does the mutual recognition between them intimate carnal violence as well as the relational sensuality and power derived from bodily virility and physical prowess? What coheres and underscores the relationship between them and the collective is the circumstance of their encounter in which in this barren landscape survival rests on collaboration, discipline, order, and

physical endurance. These provocative images beg such questions as for whom they are intended and why? Of what import is male authority in the larger societal frame of patriarchy and male culture? What are we to make of the time and circumstance of their production and do they align in distinct ways with *White Material*'s story?



Figure 4. (a) Image of shirtless man and soldiers training in background, *Beau Travail*; (b) Jacket cover of man in background looking at man in foreground, *Beau Travail*; (c) Back and front jacket cover of DVD, *Beau Travail*.

### 35 Rhums ("35 Shots of Rum")

Unlike other film posters and jacket covers in the gallery, this poster features written text (fig. 5). How does the written text work to signify the man/woman (father/daughter) story that the image otherwise complicates? The visual depiction of the man (father) and woman (daughter) suggests a relationship fraught with ambiguity and apprehension rather than understanding, parental support and familial intimacy that the film itself portrays. Why suggest otherwise by this image? Do such incongruities between poster and film call attention to the commercial interests of the distributor (which may trump and depart from the narrative trajectory and storyline of the film and intention of the filmmaker)? What purpose, then, is served by marketing a film whose representation in a poster is misleading to audiences?



Figure 5. *35 Rhums*.

Consider, too, that an alternate reading of the film, suggested by the darker complexioned man and lighter one of the woman, is to allude to miscegenation perhaps intended to provoke and titillate audiences. In addition to being marked by generational differences between them, as well as gendered and raced determinations in an unknown setting and place, what is discernable in the poster that reveals the circumstance of their encounter, their situation? Here, like in the visual language of the posters of *Chocolat*, the centrality and importance of the characters are depicted in a manner misleading to audiences, yet by their ambiguity and inference, provoke their interest.

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Together, such film posters and jacket covers in the gallery invite comparisons. For example, why are the black males in *White Material* (fig. a) and *35 Rhums* depicted ominously or sexually as ambivalent or predatory? Conversely, for what purpose are the white women portrayed distraught, alone to resolve their conflicts, and repressed or in denial of their desires in *Chocolat* and *White Material*. Do these depictions correspond to their portrayals in the films? Do they allude to gender distinctions along particular behavioral formations? If so, is Denis's project at odds with the distributors' intentions? And finally, are the images constituting the subject of hybridity in the colonial and postcolony encounters in these films, and that of metropolitan society in *35 Rhums*, as much a matter of culture and politics as they are of biology?

These readings and queries are by no means exhaustive, but together they point to a dissonance between, arguably, the interests of distributors and filmmaker and to the sexual, gender, and racial intersectionalities at work in poster art. They also foreground how commercial interests inform, constrain, and perhaps upstage and eclipse artistic and cultural concerns. In this sense, the posters selected for this gallery illustrate the collision between cultural discourses distinguished by gender, racial, class and sexual markers as they are a constituent part of Claire Denis's cinematographic archive.

## Notes

1. Dave Kehr, "Still Images Promoting Moving Pictures," *New York Times*, November 23, 2011.

2. Ibid.

3. Elizabeth Rauh, "The Graphics of Revolution and War: Iranian Poster Art," *Themer-est-ter*, Fall 2011, Art Museum, Indiana University, 1.

4. See David Kunzle, "Revolutionary film posters," *Jump Cut*, <http://www.ejumpcut>

.org/archive/onlinessays/JC19folder/Soviet and Michael Fischer and Meddi Abedi, "Revolutionary Posters and Cultural Signs," *Middle East Report* 159 (1989): 29–32.

5. Kunzle, "Revolutionary..." 3.

6. Daniel Cookney, "May 1968: The Posters That Inspired a Movement," *Alterne*, <https://www.alternet.org/may-1968-posters-inspired-movement?src=newsletter1092172>.

7. Catherine Baker, "Roots of Resistance: Posters of the first intifada," *Mondoweiss*, January 4, 2013. <http://mondoweiss.net/roots-of-resistance-25-year-retrospective-on-the-first-intifada/>

8. Several of these posters were included in the exhibit, *Clair Denis: Confronting the Other*, sponsored by the Black Film Center/Archive in conjunction with the November 2012 film series sponsored by several Indiana University entities: Indiana University Cinema, the Department of French and Italian, and the then Department of Communication and Culture and now Cinema and Media Studies unit in the Media School; and the Institut français, Unifrance, Cultural Services of the French Embassy.

9. Regarding in the film, Maria's determination to save the plantation, herself, and her son Manuel who is mentally troubled.