William A. Vincent

The Unreal But Visible Line: Difference and Desire for the Other in Chocolat

Chocolat, by Claire Denis, is a film about desire and transgression set in colonial and post-colonial Africa. In the film, Denis posits a set of oppositions – black-white, African-nonAfrican, past-present, north-south, male-female, colonizer-colonized – and asks whether they can be transgressed, by transgression reconciled, and by reconciliation fused.

The main body of the film consists of a flashback to colonial Cameroon in the late 1950s. The frame story, set in the film’s present, begins in the south of the country, at a beach deserted except for a black man and his small son playing in the surf while a white woman – France – sits fully dressed under some trees beyond the beach. She is listening to a Walkman. She leaves and begins walking along a road. Shortly thereafter, she is offered a ride to Limbé by the man and his son. As she looks out the window at a lush landscape, the landscape changes to arid bush, and we are in the North, in the past; and France as a little girl is sitting in the back of a pickup truck. In the front are her father, Marc Dalens, French district officer at Mindif, and her mother, Aimée. Riding in the back with France is the houseboy, Protée. These will be the main characters in the subtle drama that unfolds.

The key metaphor in the film is the concept of the horizon. When a plane flies over the post, France tells her father that it fell. Marc says that “planes don’t fall. They go below the horizon.” Later, Marc explains the concept of the horizon to France:

When you look toward the hills, ... where the earth touches the sky, that’s the horizon. ... The closer you get to that line the further it moves. If you walk

toward it, it moves away. It flees from you. I must also explain this to you.
You see the line. You see it, but it doesn't exist.

By the time he finishes, France is asleep, but he is speaking directly to the camera, to us.

Denis reinforces this concept of the non-existent but visible line of the horizon by means of her filming techniques. She includes many shots of the horizon, beginning with the opening establishing shot of the sea, and continuing with several shots of the landscape of North Cameroon. In the South, aside from the opening shot, the horizon is obscured by trees and buildings. By her tight framing, she accentuates the horizontality of the buildings in the North – the post, the schoolhouse, and other village buildings. When she moves the camera she almost always employs horizontal pans and tracking shots. Thus, she introduces the visual concept of the horizon long before its articulation.

The post at Mindif has an inscription on its outside wall, put there by a German official before World War I: “This is the last house on earth.” Symbolically, therefore, the house must be located at the mythical line of the horizon. Here a number of other non-existent but visible lines converge – the line between the races, between the sexes, between the indigenous and the foreigner, between African and Western, between colonized and colonizer. And, true to its symbolic position, it is a place where those lines have been transgressed – the German official who built the post is said to have been killed by his “boys” – and are transgressed repeatedly throughout the film.

Some characters in the film keep the lines that separate them from the Other firmly in their sights. The newlyweds, a French colonial officer and his bride, with their distrust of the African doctor, are two such characters. So too are the villagers who taunt Protée with his subservience to France and who are clearly on the verge of throwing off the yoke of colonialism. So, to some extent, is the Englishman, Jonathan, who dresses formally for dinner and carries with him a picture of the Queen to hang on the wall. But even he is seen to transgress one, perhaps two, of the lines of European politesse: he invites his hostess to sleep with him, seeking the same closeness he had experienced earlier when he had spent the night with Marc. Similar in character is the coffee planter, Delpiche, who repeatedly shows his contempt for the