

35 Shots of Rum (2008)

Major Credits

Director: Claire Denis

Screenplay: Claire Denis and Jean-Pol Fargeau

Cinematography: Agnès Godard

Music: Tindersticks

Cast: Alex Descas (Lionel), Mati Diop (Joséphine), Nicole Dogue (Gabrielle), Grégoire Colin (Noé), Julieth Mars-Toussaint (René), Ingrid Caven (the German Aunt)

Production Background

Claire Denis was raised in colonial West Africa before moving with her family at 14 to receive her education in Paris. Several of her films, including her acclaimed first feature *Chocolat* (1988), *Beau travail* (1999), and *White Material* (2009) are set in Africa. She often works with the same cinematographer, Agnès Godard, and co-scenarist Jean-Pol Fargeau; several of the leading actors (Descas, Dogue, and Colin) have also collaborated with her frequently, creating a kind of repertory company.

Denis has said that the story was based on the relationship between her mother and her grandfather, a Brazilian whose wife died when his daughter was young. The film was also strongly influenced by a festival of Ozu's films, especially *Late Spring* (1949), that Clair had attended with her mother in Paris.

The director originally planned to shoot a scene explaining the origin of the drinking ritual that gives the work its title, but she decided to cut it from the script because it proved "boring." Note how the film nonetheless derives its sense of formal unity by employing the reference at the beginning and end.

Cinematic Qualities

1. Music and Sound Design: The English band Tindersticks has collaborated with Denis on six films to date. The non-diegetic music pervades the sound track from the opening train sequence, serving to "fill the space" felt by the absence of dialogue. The diegetic presence of the Commodores' "Night Shift" (one of Denis' favorite songs) contributes to the intense eroticism of the late-night cafe sequence.
2. The opening sequence introduces a calm, predictable rhythm that is maintained throughout the film and is uncharacteristic for a Clair Denis film. Even the moments of disruption and despair pass by without trauma or melodrama.

Questions for Discussion

1. As the scholar Yvette Biró has suggested, “comprehension has to occur retroactively” in this film. For example, the relationship between Lionel and Joséphine seems momentarily ambiguous—are they a couple?—and remains singular throughout much of the narrative. Similarly, the roles of Gabrielle, Noé, and the German Aunt are deliberately withheld. What is the effect of these slowly revealed, subtle characterizations?
2. The scene in the African-owned café is an extraordinary set piece that has been widely acclaimed by reviewers and scholars. Denis has frequently employed dancing (most notably in *Beau travail*) to convey the deepest human of human instincts. Note how she employs close-ups more frequently than in any other scene to convey the eroticism and consequent jealousy that permeate the otherwise hospitable space. What is the dramatic significance of the scene? How does it serve as a plot point as well as a cinematic *tour de force*?
3. The lone scene that takes place outside the confines of Paris seems to disrupt the narrative for little obvious purpose. Indeed, most reviewers have ignored the Lübeck sequence entirely, perhaps because they were uncertain how to identify the new characters. What purposes are served by this interlude in Germany?
4. Denis chose the apartment very carefully and has elaborated on the importance of its interior architecture. How does this particular space help to define the relationship of its occupants?
5. What does the role of René contribute to the fabric of the film?