

# Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

September 17, 2011

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Wearing White in the West ■ Bhikkhunīsamyutta





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# Film Review of “Blind Attachment”

A review of French director  
Clair Denis’ film *White Material*

by Kathy Jean Schultz

Isabella Huppert



Every so often a film comes along with many Buddhist teachings on display. French director Clair Denis’ most recent film, a seemingly simple historical tale, is one example of this. “White Material” swells, from its first frame, into an intriguing take on the deep roots of craving. Craving is not easy to identify in ourselves—although it seems crystal clear in others. For practicing Buddhists, the film is a treasure trove of what not to do, and one that drives home the danger of not letting go. Stubborn clinging can only lead to misery, and sometimes tragic consequences as it does in this story.

The French actress Isabella Huppert plays a classic control freak, a white colonial coffee-ranch owner in an African country. She marches about in most every scene. Her inability to detach from her traditional lifestyle is so deeply rooted it can only end in devastation. Huppert plays rancher Maria Vial. Director Clair Denis’ father worked for the French government in Africa and Denis grew up in four different French colonial African countries, including Cameroon and Sierra Leone. She is now a film professor in Switzerland, and many of her films

draw on her childhood experiences around white colonialism dying, being suffocated by Africans unwilling to be treated like slaves in their homelands anymore.

“White Material,” a French film with English subtitles, is set in a land where violent revolutionary soldiers, primarily captured children who are given guns, are taking over the country road by road, bus by bus, gate by gate.

Colonial-style whites are in danger. Maria denies that. The departing French army drops survival packets from helicopters, but Maria laughs them off, and kicks the survival packs around defiantly, assuming she will never need such a thing. She knows Africa. She and her family have lived here all her life. She has what she assumes to be normal relationships with her black foreman

and her longtime black employees. She has been the coffee rancher and the manager, and the strong-willed woman who can pull her own weight in the business. She is the region’s economic driver, and her workers have always depended on her for their livelihood. Surely a person of that stature can be in control forever.

Maria is under siege both physically and mentally, but operates in denial of both. She keeps her emotions under strict control, thereby keeping common sense at bay.

She brings new meaning to the word “stoic.” A robot soldiering on.

Is this a good thing?

Maria is strong in the face of crisis, determined, stubborn. At first. Over time, however, her stance hardens into a tunnel vision that keeps her deluded and in denial about what is obvious to everyone but her. Her fierce clinging becomes almost comical.

Her workers are scared, and they are escaping to safety just as the critical week of coffee bean harvesting is set to begin. The timing of the revolution is just awful for Maria. If only the bloodbath had come at the season’s



end, after the beans were all picked, it would be more convenient for her.

But she needs her profits, she needs her earnings, she needs to do things just as she has always done. She clings to her schedule. Nothing will interfere with her almighty schedule. Maria's needs and wants blind her to the end of white rule. She clings to the belief she can buy her way into the lifestyle she insists upon. A tsunami of change is coming and she tries to stop it with her rifle and her U.S. dollars.

As her workers walk away from the child soldiers they know are hiding just over the hill, she chides them to stay "just one more week. Just one short week." De-luded people minimize danger, especially the danger of violence and how quickly things can go south, literally in seconds. We all want things the world can never give us—permanence, safety, permanence, security, permanence, dependable sources of pleasure and well-being, loved ones always being the same and available, and on, and on. Did I mention permanence?

wired, as if we are fighting human nature itself. In a pivotal moment, Maria's workers have all escaped to try and save their families. She marches up to a house where she knows she may be able to find and hire another crew, and she asks two women there if there are any men around who will come and harvest for her. For just one more week, as she puts it, just one simple little week. White colonialism is falling down around her, and she impetuously heralds those around her to join her in not seeing what is happening, driving the stake of denial deeper.

One of the women goes off to find the men. Maria and the second woman wait outside. An impatient white imperialist, who's pretty much ordered black workers around her entire life, Maria paces and mutters, while the black woman stands stone still. Maria moves to follow the first woman and the woman says to her "Wait."

Maria is not accustomed to waiting, to taking orders from anyone, to having anything other than her own way. "Wait," stops her. She is now in a desperate situ-



Still of Isabelle Huppert in *White Material*

Maria presumes that what she's always had—a white-owned ranch in an African country, employing an array of impoverished African workers who supply her demands and keep her profits flowing with their labor and their reliable, dependable presence—will always be there. Her arrogance deludes her into thinking that the threats, and reports of attacks coming over the transistor radios the workers can hear everywhere, are just the passing fancy of some rogue army guys.

As we say in the West, she is clueless.

And proud of it.

Impermanence could drown this character before she even admits she's near water.

As we reach for detachment, for letting go, as we work to overcome craving, it can sometimes feel hard-

ation of her own creation, built upon her expectations, and so she must do as the woman asks.

It seems like the first time a black woman has ever told this white woman what to do. Maria's attachment hangs in the air, thick as pudding. She has always walked where she wants, gotten what she wants, and "waits" on no one's orders.

At this moment, however, she is stopped, like we are so often when we have lost sight of detachment. If we have no expectations we have no problems, but we often forget this.

"Wait." You, wait. You, stop. Stop, now. Here. Maria's arrogance drains from her being. Life as she knows it has come to a halt. Not in some riotous battle or in a raging crowd. Not in the midst of fireworks. But in a



Still of Isabelle Huppert in *White Material*

simple setting, just two people, standing face to face in the yard. She is no longer in charge. That's been an unthinkable option, as it always is, until we find we are no longer in charge.

When we make sincere efforts to detach, to relinquish control, to stop being enslaved to craving, when the blood-pressure-torquing pace of life no longer delivers and apparently never will deliver true peace of mind, we are stopped in our tracks.

"Wait," the woman Maria has had economic power over orders, and if Maria has any hope of having her precious harvest completed, she must wait.

She'll need to swallow her iron will, her Manifest Destiny, her denial of anything she wishes not to see. Her bulldozing toward millions of profits, and her grit, are funneled into a monosyllable. Wait.

Like many white Africans, she lives in a protectively thick-walled concrete house and inside an equally impenetrable denial. The rebels are targeting white people as well as their possessions, the "White Material" of the title.

It is one of the film's many tale-spinning metaphors that Maria drives a bulldozer and is a bulldozer. "From zero to sixty" is a phrase we hear often in our culture. Like it's a good thing. It's a concept often held up as a positive idea. If a car boasts an engine that can accelerate it from 0 to 60 quickly, that's an asset. If a person's temperament goes from 0 to 60 quickly, ah, not so much.

"White Material" depicts the opposite journey, the one that goes from 60 to 0 – a familiar experience on the road to enlightenment.

That's right – wait. Don't go now. Anywhere, anymore.

Filmmaker Clair Denis uses her own life story and current struggles in modern Africa to shine a light on facets of practice that are thousands of years old. She tells a story about the tragedy of attachment, often felt but not often so brightly illuminated.

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