

Look for form and feeling, be honest and ask if there is something more important to be said, Qumra Master Claire Denis tells emerging filmmakers

- *One of Europe's most distinctive auteurs, French director and writer Claire Denis shares the shock she felt about racism and colonialism as a young girl and how she approaches all cinema from her heart*

Doha, Qatar; March 14, 2021: Qumra Master Claire Denis, regarded as one of the world's most distinctive auteurs, had one overarching piece of advice for emerging filmmakers, drawing from her own experience of making films that mattered and touched people around the world: "Be honest. Look for form and feeling. Ask if there is something more important to be said," she said in the first Qumra Masterclass attended by a global audience.

One of the highlights of the opening day of Qumra 2021, Doha Film Institute's annual talent incubator for Arab cinema, the virtual masterclass moderated by Richard Peña, the Programme Director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Director of the New York Film Festival from 1988 until 2012, took participants on a throwback into the films that defined Denis's career and also presented exceptional insights into how she approached films, right from her sensational debut, *Chocolat* (1988), which competed for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

With generous short-takes of her movies, Peña set the tone for the dialogue, examining milestone movies from her career, including her debut, a semi-autobiographical reflection on French colonialism in Africa that examines racial tension and belonging. On her first film, Denis said: "The first film is always very difficult. I thought if I wanted the first film to be saying something, I need to express not myself, not my first lover or whatever, it would be in one of the places I grew and did remember. To produce and to find the money to do a first film in Cameroon was a little extravagant. And I had to dig a lot to find people interested enough, it took time."

Digging deeper was a refrain Denis would make during the masterclass, urging emerging filmmakers to probe every scene deeper, and to use writing blocks to find "an emotional passage from one step to another. Sometimes, the scripting is perfect, the casting is perfect – yet the film is not there. The images might be beautiful and yet something is missing. You need to dig deeper to find the form and feeling," she said.

Denis says she consciously tries to find her most important messages through her films. "When I was doing location scouting, we were driving past those beautiful landscapes.... that have been made for filmmaking, and I felt I am the luckiest person in the world. But there's a voice in my head telling me it's not my landscape. The landscape I see when I close my eyes is a different landscape and that's what I wanted for my first film," she said.

Denis said she has probed into her own life and experiences for her movies, such as *35 Rhums* (2009), a compelling portrayal of a father-daughter relationship in a mixed immigrant community. "I was really so happy to tell a very personal story. [The theme on racial tensions] was not raising a flag; for me black lives

have always been around me, so it matters of course. I film what I see every day. I film my neighborhood and the people I meet.”

Denis shared her experience as a young girl, being shocked at the daily grind of people in Africa. “Showing the African continent as if it was a place for white people to live as masters was sort of seen as the norm. But I remember, as a young girl, being completely upset by the fact that while I was having breakfast or dinner served by someone, and that we never had to clean the floor like how I would have been doing in France. Suddenly we were living in a different social class only because we were white. The ignorant situation of white superiority or predominance is fake superiority. I was not raised like that and the fake gaze of white people always embarrasses me.”

Her inimitable ‘humanity’ shines through even in her approach to science-fiction, as Denis says: “When I was a teenager, I used to read a lot of science-fiction. They reminded me the mystery of our fragility, mystery of what is time – is it a torture or only a measure of each one's destiny.” But science-fiction as a genre for her, will never be “about a conquest or winning war. That is not my interest at all.”

On her upcoming film, *The Stars at Noon*, featuring Robert Pattinson and Margaret Qualley, Denis said she “hopes to do it in the fall because by then the vaccination will have been [done] and we will be able to shoot.” On Robert, she said: “He is someone I met surprisingly because he wanted to meet me, and I was shy and surprised but then I realised I was meant to work with him. It was like someone I knew already, he was so open, so generous, so mysterious too.”

Other Qumra Masters, who will share their insights this year are: BAFTA and Academy Award® nominated cinematographer Phedon Papamichael, internationally celebrated director and Cannes veteran James Gray, Silver Lion winning film director and screenwriter Jessica Hausner and Academy Award® winning sound designer Mark Mangini are the Qumra Masters this year, who will share their invaluable insights with the participants during their master-classes.

Public can access Qumra online by purchasing a Qumra Pass that offers the full Qumra Screenings and Qumra Talks programmes. Qumra Pass is open to all citizens and residents of Qatar and the MENA region, and applications will be processed on a first-come first-serve basis. The Qumra Pass is priced at QAR 500; students and Culture Pass by Qatar Museums holders can purchase it for a discounted price of QAR 350.

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About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

About Qumra

Directors and Producers attached to 48 projects in development and post-production are invited to participate in the event. They will include a number of emerging filmmakers from Qatar, as well as recipients of funding from the Institute’s Grants Programme. The robust programme will feature industry meetings designed to assist with propelling projects to their next stages of development, including master classes, work-in-progress screenings, bespoke matchmaking sessions and tailored workshops with industry experts. This creative exchange will take place alongside a programme of public screenings curated with input from the Qumra Masters.



The event is organised in three main sections: The Qumra Master Classes are daily sessions; each led by one of the Masters. The participating filmmakers have full access to these sessions, which are also open to accredited industry guests to attend in an observational capacity.

The Qumra Meetings are a series of one-on-one meetings, workshops and tailored mentoring sessions between representatives from the selected projects and seasoned industry experts.

The Qumra Screenings are open to the public and feature projects funded by the Institute through its grants and co-financing initiatives, as well as a series of films chosen by the Qumra Masters accompanied by Q&A sessions. The Arabic term 'qumra' is popularly said to be the origin of the word 'camera', and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.