

Clouds of Sils Maria (2014) Assayas

P Michell, 2018

A film about acting. Sometimes unclear when actors are in theatre character or not!
Stunningly set in Swiss alps.

Good cast including - Juliette Binoche – Maria; Kristen Stewart – Valentine; Chloe Grace Moretz – Jo-Ann, Lars Eldiger – Klaus.

Summary: At the peak of her international career, Maria Enders (Juliette Binoche) is asked to perform in a revival of the play that made her famous twenty years ago. But back then she played the role of Sigrid, an alluring young girl who disarms and eventually drives her boss Helena to suicide. Now she is being asked to step into the other role, that of the older Helena. She departs with her assistant (Kristen Stewart) to rehearse in Sils Maria; a remote region of the Alps. A young Hollywood starlet with a penchant for scandal (Chloë Grace Moretz) is to take on the role of Sigrid, and Maria finds herself on the other side of the mirror, face to face with an ambiguously charming woman who is, in essence, an unsettling reflection of herself.

Metacritic.com

Olivier Assayas – Director / Writer & Critic

Son of film writer / director - Jacques Remy (active late 1940s to 1960s, TV mini-series scripts 1970s)

Married to Maggie Cheung (1998-2011) – she starred in his Irma Vep (1996)

Writes for Cahiers du Cinema, published ‘Conversations with (Ingmar) Bergman, 1990.

Best known for his films Demonlover (2002), Something in the Air (2012), Clouds of Sils Maria (2014) and Personal Shopper (2016).

Note - New film in production (2019 release) – Non Fiction with Binoche.

Yorick Le Saux – cinematographer – 45 films.

Assayas films. Also Ozon’s Swimming Pool (2003) and Potiche (2010).

Trivia

Juliette Binoche went to writer/director Olivier Assayas and pitched the idea of the film to him. He liked it and wrote the script.

The French fashion house Chanel supplied the actresses with clothes, jewelry, accessories and makeup, while also providing some of the budget to allow Olivier Assayas to fulfill his dream of shooting the movie on 35-mm film instead of digitally.

Kristen Stewart was offered the role of Valentine and wanted to accept, but a misunderstanding with her agent led to another actress (Wasikowska) being cast. Stewart reached out to rectify what happened and was offered the role of Jo-Ann Ellis, but was unsure. Wasikowska later dropped out and Stewart was officially cast as Valentine.

Juliette Binoche revealed in an interview that she took a role in [Godzilla](#) (2014) to believably deliver a line from the "Clouds of Sils Maria" script about acting in blockbusters.

Reviews:

David Ehrlich, 6 Apr 2015

A heady psychosexual drama that's steeped in dense anxieties and rich European glamour (the film was partially funded by Chanel), Olivier Assayas's latest finds the French auteur at the very top of his game. Combining the acute professional paranoia of *All About Eve* with the existential crisis of *Persona*, *Clouds of Sils Maria* stars the remarkably accomplished Juliette Binoche as Maria Enders, a fading star who's agreed to be in a revival of the play that made her famous as a young ingenue. This time, however, Maria isn't performing the part of the seductive teenager awakening to the power of her sexuality; she's playing the older woman who's wrapped around the girl's finger. Retreating to the Swiss Alps with her unfailingly honest assistant (Kristen Stewart, a deadpan revelation), Maria begins a rehearsal process that will force her to grapple with the presentness of her past.

It's a sexy concept that will thrill Assayas neophytes, but the director's longtime fans will find its pleasures virtually pornographic. The film may not share the same fetish for reflexivity that made 1996's *Irma Vep* such a playful hall of mirrors—that film used people as a conduit to exploring the arts, while this one does the opposite—but *Sils Maria* owns its meta moments, Binoche mining our familiarity with her real-life career in order to contextualize Maria's neuroses and Stewart making several pointed comments about her own immense celebrity. An erotic tension develops between the two women, but as the film around them grows increasingly cryptic, it begins to seem as though Maria may be lusting after her own shadow. Assayas eventually punctuates the point with a gut punch, blurring the line between fantasy and reality in order to illustrate how great art can make the distinction irrelevant. And this is indeed great art.

WAY UP HIGH

Anthony Lane, New Yorker, 20 Apr 2015

What happens in "Clouds of Sils Maria," the new film from Olivier Assayas? Well, it starts on a train, where a celebrated actress of stage and screen, Maria Enders (Juliette Binoche), accompanied by Valentine (Kristen Stewart), her personal assistant, is heading to Zurich. There she is scheduled to attend a tribute to a playwright named Wilhelm Melchior, but the plan is thrown awry by the news, en route, that Melchior has died. Nonetheless, the tribute goes ahead, after which the two women meet with his widow, Rosa (Angela Winkler), at her house in the Swiss mountains. She invites them to stay there while she is away. Years before, Melchior wrote a play, "Maloja Snake," about a

female corporate boss who has an affair with a manipulative young woman in her office—originally played by Maria. Now, in middle age, she has been asked to revisit the work, on the London stage, in the role of the older woman, like a Gertrude who was once an Ophelia. And so, at high altitude, Maria rehearses her lines, with Valentine reading the other part, in Melchior’s home and on lung-filling hikes through the hills.

If this sounds peculiar, brace yourself for the movie, which is the most disorienting that Assayas has yet devised. The giddiness infects his characters. Valentine drives around so many hairpin bends that she has to get out and throw up, while the soundtrack—which rings elsewhere with stately excerpts of Handel and Pachelbel—assaults us with Primal Scream. Then there is the uncertainty as to whether the dialogue belongs to the play or to Maria and Valentine themselves; often, we cannot tell where their fictional relationship ends and their real one begins. “What do I need to do to make you admire me?” Maria asks, and the question drifts like smoke. When, in a rush of rage, she sweeps everything off a table and stalks out of the room, the camera flinches from such a raw display, only for Valentine to check her copy of the play and recite the stage directions: “ ‘She takes a deep breath, regains her composure.’ ” Not that the confusion stops when other people speak, since what comes out of their mouths has the clunk of the overwritten: “Her conventional style of acting highlighted the modernity of your performance”; “Tastes can get worn out, kind of like desire.” Almost the whole movie is in English, but we seem to be trapped inside a badly translated foreign novel, with no escape.

Yet this strong scent of unreality, which will send many viewers reeling, does have a purpose to fulfill. After all, this is a movie about acting, and about the boundaries that divide it from the rest of life. Assayas also reminds us that the orbit of dramatic stars, up at Maria’s level, is unreal: a spooky round of photo shoots, festivals, limousines, shifting schedules, and whims no sooner vented than indulged. Her first duty, on learning of Melchior’s demise, is to meet a press officer from Chanel and try on an evening gown, as if that were a natural way to mourn; you can either squirm at the product placement or treat it as an accurate account of a stylishly malformed moral world. Hence the need for Valentine, forever juggling her phones, and batting away the swarm of ludicrous roles that keep being offered to Maria. “There’s a Spanish horror flick, it’s pretty gory, you’d be playing a Mother Superior,” she reports.

Solving a problem like Maria, however, is no sweat compared with the task of handling Jo-Ann Ellis (Chloë Grace Moretz). She is a rising actress, which means that nothing is more avidly awaited than her fall; the Internet is alive with her meltdowns. But the director of “Maloja Snake” sees something in her, and wants her to play the young seductress, opposite Maria. In a typical Assayas move, we jump without warning to a clip from Jo-Ann’s latest blockbuster, in which she wears a shiny maroon spacesuit and says things like “Zargon is not a mutant, but he understands mutant desire.” Valentine, being of the Jo-Ann generation, is keen to extoll her talents. “She goes deep into the darker side of her character,” she tells Maria, over drinks. Maria is much amused by this studious fan talk, and laughs so hard that she blows the foam off her beer.

Is there a better laugh than Binoche's? Dirty, rich, and Rabelaisian, it's a crucial corrective to the rarefied dolor for which directors prize her—no wonder, for her face is milk pale and schooled for sorrow, like a Madonna's. The movie studies her intently, as if waiting for her to give away something that will not be yielded in conversation. (Especially when she speaks English; to be fluent and to be at ease in the tongue are scarcely the same thing.) I felt the lack of that intentness recently, as I watched her play Antigone, in a new translation of Sophocles by Anne Carson; the stage production has been touring Europe, and will come to bam, in the fall. Binoche, predictably, drew the crowds, and the eye, as she blazed with the desperate piety that the heroine demands. But one wanted that eye, so badly, to be a camera, pulling us into the naked flame.

As for Sils Maria, what is it? I find it hard to believe that the place exists, despite having been there. It lies in southeast Switzerland, near the fur-lined luxury of St. Moritz, where a gallery, as I passed through, was mounting a show titled "Sylvester Stallone: 35 Years of Painting." As I say, unreal. Things get doubly weird as you head along the valley to Sils Maria and climb to the Hotel Waldhaus, where the list of former guests runs, in ascending philosophical order, from Hermann Hesse and Primo Levi to Jung and Einstein, all the way up to Rod Stewart. You can still take tea there to the strains of live chamber music, and that is what we hear when Jo-Ann, in Assayas's film, appears at the hotel. Some people, defying Einstein, like to live as if time had stopped.

Two other things lure people, like pilgrims, to Sils Maria. One, as the title suggests, is clouds, and the twist of nature that sends them funnelling between peaks into a thin, transcendent stream: the Maloja Snake of the play. (Assayas has unearthed lovely footage of the phenomenon, from 1924.) The second attraction is the house, now a museum and study center, where Nietzsche spent many fruitful summers: "Here one can live well, in this strong, bright atmosphere, here where nature is amazingly mild and solemn and mysterious all at once," he wrote. That is precisely the climate that Assayas wants to summon for the movie, and we feel it acutely as Maria and Valentine embark on their regular treks. Here is the true high life—"6,000 feet beyond people and time," as Nietzsche said, and a rebuff to the ersatz variety in which Maria and her kind, not just in the movie business, and not just in Europe, are consumed.

But the new film is not a satire, or a broadside. It has none of the skittishness that leavened "Irma Vep" (1996), Assayas's comedy about a director trying, against farcical odds, to remake a silent classic of early French cinema. The result was as light-footed as a cat burglar, whereas "Clouds of Sils Maria" proceeds with a graver tread. In one respect, though not a major one, it is a masterpiece: seldom will you find a better class of fadeout. Again and again, as if taking a cue from Melchior's passing, sequences dim to black before we have readied ourselves. It happens as Maria, armed with a microphone, prepares to eulogize the deceased; as she walks away, down a corridor, in her luscious gown; as she Googles Jo-Ann on her iPad; as she stares at the slumbering Valentine; and as they bathe together in a lake, screaming in joy at the cold.

Near the end, in line with Nietzsche's words, a solemn mystery is sprung upon us and left unsolved, yet that is not the chief surprise of the movie. Who could have guessed that it

would be stolen by the young? When Jo-Ann eventually arrives, for instance, she proves to be decorous and demure, with a novelist for a boyfriend, and a gray dress designed by you know who. She also has a wolf pack of paparazzi on her trail, and one of the film's delights—it is more than a mere in-joke—arises from seeing Kristen Stewart inspecting her own predicament, as it were, from the outside. She and her “Twilight” co-star, Robert Pattinson, have been hounded like Jo-Ann, without pause or mercy, and all three could have been forgiven for quitting the fray. But work, as ever, is the saving grace. Pattinson has turned to David Cronenberg, and Stewart first to Walter Salles (she was good in “On the Road”) and now to Assayas. It is she, rather than Binoche, who lingers in your mind when the film is over, and leaves you musing on what comes next; Valentine, chafing at her job, with her uncool spectacles and her droopy shrugs, somehow holds the greater promise. The hired hand brings us down to earth, while the star is lost in the clouds. ♦

A COMPLETE CLOUDS OF SILS MARIA EXPLANATION AND WALKTHROUGH

Taylor Holmes April 10, 2015. Thinc.
Taylorholmes.com

A Complete Clouds of Sils Maria Explanation and Walkthrough

Ok shoot me. I had no idea what “Clouds of Sils Maria” was going in. None. I knew Kristen Stewart was in it and Juliette Binoche. Binoche good, Stewart bad... oh alright, we'll call it even on a slow entertainment night and give it a try. What happened next? I was agog for the entirety of its 124 minute running time. Literally. Mouth open. Eyes wide. ‘What am I watching here’ sort of amazement. If you walked into Birdman cold you know what I'm talking about here. That sort of a visceral, what is happening, response of seeing Keaton sort of playing himself, but not? Yeah... that is actually what happens in Sils Maria. But instead of at a level of 8 on the “What The HECK is Going On Here” scale, its actually more like a break the dial 27 instead.

So let me start over and tell you what this movie actually is, so that you have some semblance of a clue going into it. At least just enough of a walk through to contextualize where you stand. We will get to the spoiler bits in a bit – and those will be very very clearly demarcated. Good.

Clouds of Sils Maria Overview

“Clouds of Sils Maria” centers on the struggles of an aging actress named Maria Enders (Binoche) and her personal assistant Valentine (Stewart). Maria is asked to redo a play that made her famous at the age of 18... but with a twist. The play involved two women, a younger woman and an older woman that basically end up playing a game of cat and mouse emotionally. The older woman falls in love with the younger woman, the younger woman plays the older woman, and ultimately (apparently) the older woman commits suicide. This time though – 20 years on – Maria has been asked to play the role of the older woman, not the younger woman.

So for a lot of the movie we are seeing her discuss her original participation in this experience that made her famous and the impacts that this had on her life. And we also

see her trying to decide whether she will in reprise her participation in the play at all. She is conflicted as she considers playing the less powerful, less impactful character... at least from her current perspective. And all the while, her ever present assistant Valentine is there, commenting, prodding, encouraging, directing Maria. The plot is a bit of a quiet slow development of a constant unfolding of an enormous misdirection con. The audience is bracing itself perpetually to interact with Maria and this new young up and coming starlet, Chloë Grace Moretz (Joe-Ann Ellis), when in fact we've been watching the dance all along and it has been between Maria and Valentine.

Pardon the reduction, but Sils Maria is a movie that is making a play sort of quality to it that is similar in form to say, the Moulin Rouge. Which is a movie about a guy writing a play about a guy writing a play about the girl he wants to marry. Sils Maria has this sort of collapsing kaleidoscope effect to it that sort of is unsettling and yet natural at the same time. At many times throughout the movie as Maria and Val rehearse the lines of that are saying exactly what their 'real' counterparts would be saying. So much so that you have to listen to the names use to refer to themselves to determine whether they are still rehearsing or if they have left the script and began speaking honestly finally.

For example, current, real stars are referenced. Famous people and their very real movies are referenced. Fictional movies that sound awfully like the Twilight series are referenced replete with werewolves et al. If I hadn't known any better I would have guessed the movie was more a documentary, or at the very least a docu-drama about real life as opposed to the completely fictionalized writings of Olivier Assayas.

Now For the Sils Maria Explanation and Walkthrough

Before I delve on the movie explanation and walkthrough I think it is important that we eject all readers that have not seen the movie yet. If you are reading this, I promise you you will like the movie. So go watch it and then return to discuss the more intricate details of how the movie works. Ok? Good.

A Quick Overview of the Movie Events

As the movie opens, Maria and Val are on a train heading to an awards ceremony on behalf of Wilhelm Melchior. Wilhem was the writer and director of Maloja Snake that pole-vaulted Maria to stardom. The role Maria played as an 18 year old upstart was that of the ever manipulative Sigrid who toys with her 20 year older counterpart Helena who is obviously falling for her younger counterpart. While still en route to the award ceremony Val and Maria learn that Wilhem has passed away which has a significant impact on the proceedings and even whether Maria wants to even be involved. She decides to stay and receive the award but not before finding out that Wilhem had been sick and that he had committed suicide.

Just before receiving the award Valentine sets up a meeting with Lars Eidinger who is an up and coming director who wants to do a reboot of Wilhem's original play, Maloja Snake, that had made Maria famous. But in Lars' version he wants to cast Maria not again as Sigrid, but this time as the older Helena. This becomes one of the more interesting conversation points the movie brings to the table with regard to age and just how relevant older stars are throughout the industry. Eventually Valentine convinces

Maria that playing Helena would be a great way to show that older actresses and characters can still be powerful and innocent simultaneously. Maria consents to the role and off to Sils-Maria within Swiss Alps the pair go to begin practicing for the part. It was there that Maria becomes completely unsettled by the death of her mentor and with her own fragility and begins to grapple with her past while also struggle with the immediacy of her impending future.

And with that in mind, it is throughout this section of rehearsals in the alps that the single most meta section of the movie begins. If meta-self-referentialism isn't your schtick then I'm sure you are here to lambast the movie and not to understand it more fully, because the meta-game here is pretty intense. It is here that Assayas has completely built up a play in and about his work with Juliette Binoche. The writer/director's first release that he filmed was debuted at Cannes and was entitled "Rendezvous"... and it made Juliette a star. Mr. Assayas signed on to a reunion, which he "had no idea what the film would be," he said, "but I knew I could do something with Juliette in relationship to our common history." The history of their movie-making relationship is what is obviously mined through out Sils Maria.

As the rehearsals become more and more intense and we begin to see Valentine slowly begin to opine honestly, we see the roles of Helena and Sigrid stripped away and we start to see the true feelings of Maria and Valentine. Valentine chafes at Maria's snobbery towards her and begins to resent her boss and the lack of consideration. Maria doesn't understand why Valentine would enjoy pop-culture movies and their lack of insightfulness. And ultimate we see a lack of willingness to change on Maria's behalf that ultimately propels this relationship to its conclusion.

Clouds of Sils Maria Conclusion Explained

Valentine, throughout the movie, is very interested in seeing this phenomenon of the snake. The snake is a series of low clouds that form low to the earth because of an overhanging high pressure that forces the clouds into the valley of the mountains. It is an amazing meteorological experience and Valentine is bound and determined to do absolutely everything in her power to see it. Maria on the other hand isn't impressed by the fact that she is being expected to get up early to hike just to see a bunch of clouds. Then one morning the concierge lets Valentine know that conditions were perfect to see the snake the next morning early.

As the two are on their way Maria expresses concern that they are lost and that she was frustrated. This obviously irritates Valentine to know end who is perfectly aware of where they are and where they are going. She even attempts to show Maria on the map, "See we just came around this bend, and we are about to round this bend here and see the snake." But Maria will have none of it, and charges off on the trail ahead of Valentine. Val follows until the bend and then she disappears into a crest as we see Maria trudging defiantly on towards the view of the snake.

When Maria arrives at a good destination spot to watch from she sits on a trail and waits for the snake and for Valentine to join her, as she always has before.

But Valentine never comes. Maria begins to scream for her, but Val never responds and we never see her again. The clouds form and coalesce into a slithering form and it ducks and weaves throughout the mountains, but Maria and Val never see it, and they never see each other again.

The Trouble With The Ending of Sils Maria

In the script we are told that Sigrid spurns Helena on to commit suicide by heading into the mountains and is never seen again. Wilhem too heads out into the mountains to commit suicide. So the question that faces us today is, did Valentine leave Maria behind to commit suicide in the mountains... maybe even while watching the snake form and dance amongst the mountains? The ending is ambiguous. All that we know is that Valentine is infuriated by Maria and she stomps off into the mountains.

My personal view is pretty clear... Valentine chooses this moment to abandon a woman that had been brutal and demanding of her from the very beginning. Valentine had put up with the condescension with great aplomb. Occasionally she began to mention Maria's overbearing nature. But it was ultimately Maria's disregard for modern entertainment in the form of Jo-Ann Ellis' space movie that really drove Valentine to the brink.

Which is fascinating really. Here we have, Kristen Stewart, the queen of teen pop entertainment defending the mob of tweens that rabidly consume this "mindless fare" that Maria is railing against. Valentine gives Jo-Ann's acting accolades because she is so accessible and vulnerable. Maria even takes umbrage at this because she believes that Val is implying that her acting isn't accessible, that it is stuffy and academic. Which, if there is one critique of Binoche's acting it would be exactly that. And if there is any critique of Kristen's acting it would be that she is too lazy in her acting.

Assayas even comments on this overlapping of reality with fiction: "Even in the shift of perspective, because obviously Kristen is playing a character who is commenting on Kristen Stewart, but it's a movie where you never lose consciousness of who the actresses are, and in the end that's a very important element of the film. But that's something I only realized gradually." And so with that, I think its clear that there is no way on earth that Valentine commits suicide in the Alps. I even watched very closely in the crowd shots to see if I could see Valentine one last time, knowing full well that she had to be alive.

The movie flips the script upside down and instead of having Helena leave, we have Valentine disappear. Which also comments on the actual reality of what happened to Helena as well. She had to have not committed suicide either. Valentine even opens our eyes to this possibility when she tells Maria as she is rehearsing Helena's role that she didn't read the script to believe that Helena committed suicide, she says that the script is ambiguous on this point and that she just goes into the mountains and disappears. So to do Valentine head off into the mountains and disappear for good.

What about the Epilogue?

Where Sils Maria runs completely off the rails is the epilogue. The movie had a beautiful ending at the end. To tack on a very Hollywood-style ending (I mean that in the worst possible way) in the form of an epilogue is about as cheesy as it comes. But I'm sure some people would want to have the clarity and resolution of what the epilogue provided. "And what clarity exactly did it provide Taylor?" Thanks for asking...

Basically the only purpose of the epilogue is to show how Maria was affected by Valentine – and that she meant something to her. How do I know that? Simple enough, throughout the entirety of the epilogue we are given example after example of how she had adopted Valentine's way of thinking. She was considering a space movie – "Is it on earth?". She was accommodating and understanding with the plight of her new assistant in this daunting role. Maria asked for opinions of others and was generally transformed from beginning to end. Assayas assuredly attached on the epilogue to soften the blow to Binoche directly, it is, after all, a story about his relationship with her ultimately. We can't leave Binoche in the dog house, seeing as though she was the tent stake actress to carry this movie... that is until Kristen Stewart showed up and blew everyone else off the screen.

She definitely deserved it. I was transfixed throughout. And I was actually completely disengaged when Kristen made her departure before the epilogue. Binoche was good. But Stewart was literally brilliant. And there is word on the street that Kristen will be doing another French film soon... which I cry bravo to. Kudos to you Kristen for finding your stride.