

F I L M I N  
R E V I E W



C H A R L E S T A Y L O R

When the Dutch filmmaker Paul Verhoeven started work on his latest film, *Elle*, he assumed it would be an American production. He hired an American screenwriter, David Birke, to adapt the French novel *Oh...*, by Philippe Djian – and that was as far as the Americanization got. Not only couldn't Verhoeven obtain American financing but, according to him, every A-list American actress who read the script turned it down cold. The project moved to France, where Isabelle Huppert, who had originally wanted to make a film of Djian's novel, took on the starring role.

Watching *Elle* (which opened for wide release in November 2016 after making its American debut at the New York Film Festival in October) I find it hard to know whether to be stumped about why Verhoeven thought he could get the movie made in this country, or touched that he did. Given the current state of public discourse in America, where even the most banal things stand to be politicized – and in the case of cultural conversation, often with no more aesthetic than political intelligence – *Elle* feels akin to a blasphemy. What Verhoeven and his co-conspirator Huppert have done is to take the most explosive issue of the day, sexual assault, and upend the orthodoxies that have grown around it. *Elle* isn't a

conscious refutation of those orthodoxies. That would mean acknowledging they existed. *Elle* occasionally has the same calculation you find in the imperious and casual impudence of a line by the poet Frederick Seidel, something easier to admire than to like. Mostly, though, the film feels as if it is speaking from that place where ideology becomes irrelevant to experience. A colleague who saw the film at the New York Film Festival press screening told me that when a critic in the audience asked Verhoeven if *Elle* was a feminist or an anti-feminist movie, he said it was neither. That's the mark of both an artist who has chosen art's exploration of the uncertainties of experience over the sureties of ideology and a culture in which movies and books are judged by whether they display the correct social and political attitudes, and – especially young – critics look at art as if it were an editorial to which they have to pledge either agreement or dissent.

The subject of the film is rape, specifically the unpredictable response of one woman (Huppert's Michele) to being raped. The literalness, the distrust of nuance that permeates our conversations right now probably obliges me to say the film never pretends that consensual sex is not possible or that, even when Michele's assault plays into her own fantasy life, the reality of rape isn't violent and ugly. But Verhoeven and Huppert also understand that even consensual sex can never be made safe. It's too mysterious, too complex, and sometimes so frightening that people hide their motivations and desires even from themselves. For decades now, feminist scholars and writers have rightly insisted that rape is an act of violence, an act of control, and an act of power. What we are loath to acknowledge is that power is not alien to but an intrinsic part of sex itself, that sex is a constant nonverbal negotiation in which we sometimes act and are sometimes acted upon and thus it can never be rendered wholly benign.

As precisely made as it is, the meanings of *Elle* remain slippery. Aware of how easily we settle for comforting answers about so barbed a subject, the movie abjures psychology, and so Michele's motives can seem opaque, as can the movie's overall meaning. Just when you think you've figured out what it's doing, *Elle* swerves down another course. The opening sequence is a perfect example.

Under a black screen, we hear the sounds of a struggle: a cry of surprise, things being broken, fists hitting flesh. You steel yourself

to be confronted with the images of what you've just heard. Instead the first shot imparts another kind of jolt: a close-up of a smoke-gray cat looking at the unfolding scene with an unreadable expression, something between idle curiosity and indifference. Hitchcock, Catholic to his core, confronted his audience with images that reminded them of their complicity in the horrors before them: Janet Leigh's corpse, open mouthed, her dead eyes staring accusingly at us in *Psycho*; the woman in *The Birds* who looks right into the camera and assails us with "this didn't start happening until you came here!" Verhoeven, perverse to *his* core, gives us what may be an image of complicity, but one in which we see not the victim but ourselves. Is that cat's diffidence a mirror? Is this the composure with which we watch violence? Verhoeven follows the close-up of the cat with a perfectly composed image, seen through the frame of a doorway, of Michele's masked assailant getting off her, adjusting himself, leaving her there in shock and pain. It's an image that allows us to retain our distance, maybe even to applaud the director for his discretion. And that's a comfort Verhoeven is not willing to let us keep.

It's not long before we see the rape again, this time as Michele remembers it, and though the scene isn't sadistic or prolonged, it also allows us no distance. The brief, unexpected intensity of it might be Verhoeven ridiculing the very notion of contemplating violence at a remove. The flashback is a signal that, literally and figuratively, *Elle* will not provide a safe space. That may make *Elle* sound as if it fit squarely in the traditions of Verhoeven's previous provocations. But *Elle* is something new for him.

Verhoeven has always been a provocateur and never a subtle one. He has often walked a thin line between audacity and crassness, and in pictures like *The 4th Man*, *Black Book*, and most of *Basic Instinct*, the effrontery was a kick. At other times, he could be wearying. It was, for instance, easy enough to see that *Starship Troopers* was intended as a satire on militarism, but that didn't keep the experience of watching it from feeling as if you were being bashed unceasingly over the head. At his worst, as the critic Terence Rafferty said when reviewing *Total Recall*, a Verhoeven movie made you feel like you never wanted to go to the movies again. So maybe it's no surprise that Verhoeven's best, strongest movie, the 1995 *Showgirls*, one of the great movie melodramas, is

also his most reviled. Piling on the sex and sleaze that backstage exposés always promise and always leave out, acknowledging that no matter what protests they make for virtue, audiences love watching scheming heroines (no one has ever watched *Gone with the Wind* and rooted for Olivia de Havilland), Verhoeven made a gleeful, slashing attack on the vulgarity of materialist culture that took its energy from that vulgarity and mocked the notion that you could tackle such a subject tastefully. The legendary French director Jacques Rivette called it “one of the great American films of the last few years.”

Which is why the subdued control and relative subtlety of *Elle* is the most shocking thing about it. Stéphane Fontaine’s cinematography envelops the movie in a chic, wintry gray that finds its perfect match in Huppert’s sangfroid. The movie is chilly instead of heated. At seventy-eight, Verhoeven directs as someone who has abandoned the outlandish in favor of a cultivated, wry disdain. It’s the work of a man saying what he thinks who can no longer be bothered with anyone who might find those thoughts shocking. Before, Verhoeven depended on the audience being shocked. Here, he seems to regard shock as naïveté.

The daring of *Elle*, and what may prove to be so unpalatable to some, is the way the movie links two articles of feminist faith: that from catcalling to rape, sexual harassment and violence are the common experience of many women, and that women are resilient, tough, resourceful. The movie isn’t out to refute those beliefs but to believe them both at the same time. Linked in the way the movie links them, they’re an implicit rebuke to the persistent strain of feminism which fetishizes victimization, which classifies any expression of lust or sexual desire as another form of violence that women, wilting Victorian flowers that they are, need be protected from. And it’s a rebuke to the insistence that no woman every really recovers from sexual victimization as a paradoxical affirmation of male power and female helplessness.

The montage that follows the opening rape scene shows Michele sweeping up broken glass, bathing her wounds in the bathtub (a red triangle floats in the water above her pubis), ordering take-out sushi for her dinner. It’s an invitation to the kind of psychology-textbook reading the movie resists – i.e., she is acting this way because she is in denial. But nothing about Michele’s behavior

suggests a person hiding from the reality that's been forced on her. The next day, Michele orders new locks for her doors and windows, visits her doctor for a full STD scan, publicly slaps down a young male upstart employee at the video game company she founded, reminding him that she's the boss and thus the one who makes decisions. A few scenes later, we see her out to dinner with friends – her ex-husband, her best friend and business partner Anna (Anne Consigny), and Anna's husband (with whom Michele is having an affair) – calmly telling them about the rape. Michele doesn't pretend she's not affected. There are, in fact, *two* flashbacks to the rape, the one where we see what the opening didn't show us, and another, a revenge fantasy in which Michele crushes her rapist's head to a bloody pulp. (Verhoeven ends this sequence by cutting to Huppert as she imagines it, the ghost of a smile playing on her lips.) But Michele isn't ruined or paralyzed – and for those who believe that being a victim is a woman's inevitable and irrevocable state and insist on ideological readings of art, that can only mean that the movie doesn't take her rape seriously.

It does, of course. But even though the movie is stylistically subdued, Verhoeven's usual perversity is still present. Michele refuses to go to the police, but for reasons of her own. When she was ten, Michele's father went on a killing spree, murdering their neighbors in a frenzy. Michele was helping her father burn his bloody clothes when he was apprehended, and the police treated her as if she could have been an accomplice. Michele's father wound up imprisoned for life and Michele has refused ever to see him. She and her mother have endured years of being spat at in public or otherwise abused by strangers. But Michele remembers how the police treated her the first time she was a victim and she's damned if she'll trust them now. This part of Michele's history hovers teasingly over the story after she discovers the identity of her rapist – she unmasks him as he is attempting to rape her again – and then enters into an inexplicable folie à deux.

Is Michele simply determined never again to be a victim? Or has she inherited some devious gene which means her subsequent interactions with her rapist are part of a scheme to trap him? Neither of these possibilities keeps Michele's attacker from playing a part in her erotic imagination, and this is the part of the film its detractors are bound to find most objectionable. I suspect that it

will lead people to charge Verhoeven with saying women secretly want to be raped, though the film simply doesn't support that reading. At one point Michele risks another rape, which then occurs, to be alone with this man. It's an upsetting sequence and not one that gives itself to an immediately comprehensible reading. But it does show the movie's ability to make fine distinctions between the erotic game playing that leads Michele to take the risk, and the physical and mental violence that results.

Verhoeven is saying something that should be obvious – our sexual fantasies can involve things we'd never actually want to happen. But one of the unpleasant truths about what the feminist critic Ellen Willis once called feminist “neo Victorians” is their belief that even fantasy needs to be policed. In her 1982 piece “Towards a Feminist Sexual Revolution,” Willis wrote that the neo-Victorians posited a view of sex that is “genitally oriented, hence male, hence sadistic and violent, while invoking the concept of ‘erotica’ as a code for sex that is gentle, romantic, relationship-oriented – in a word feminine.” Willis realized that this, along with such things as the feminist movement against pornography, played squarely into the right wing's wish to regulate and control women's sexuality.

It wouldn't surprise me if *Elle* proved to be more divisive by age than by gender. I don't claim that my anecdotal experience is conclusive, and it may strike some as unseemly for a man to make this observation, but I have encountered many women over forty who are baffled if not offended by the dogmatic insistence on victimization that seems to animate particularly younger feminists. Many of the women I've spoken to are writers and to a person have all told me they work now with the expectation that they will be excoriated by younger women for writing something from their own experience of sex that those women cannot easily fit into current feminist orthodoxy. They've also confided that they resent the possibility being attacked by people who find those orthodoxies easier to believe because they haven't yet encountered the experience that would cast them into doubt.

The authority these women claim, the authority of experience, is at the heart of the command with which Huppert holds the screen in *Elle*. There have been times in the past when Huppert's combination of hauteur and extravagant suffering has threatened

to make her into something like an art-house Joan Crawford. As I write this, in the closing months of 2016 – not having yet seen some of the films still awaiting release – Huppert’s performances in *Elle* and in Mia Hansen-Love’s charming and lovely *Things to Come* look like (along with Ethan Hawke as Chet Baker in *Born to Be Blue*) the performances of the year. Huppert’s work in *Elle* shows both fearlessness and control, steeliness and pliability. It also depends on her making it all look effortless. If the performance seemed slaved over, then the tone Verhoeven is trying to establish, a tone that takes for granted all the dark power of sex we pretend not to know, would take on the portentousness of a big statement. Michele, who seems completely self-aware and yet as unreadable as that staring cat in the first shot, is not a character we feel close to. But we watch her closely because of that unreadability. And we’re on her side because she’s a master in a world of incompetents.

Jacques Rivette said that Verhoeven’s great subject was “surviving in a world populated by assholes.” In *Elle*, those assholes are the men. They exist in various stages of weakness, from Michele’s ex-husband, who can’t find his footing, to her son, who allows himself to be manipulated by his horrendous fiancée; from the gigolo out to get what he can from Michele’s aging mother (who wants to believe she’s still a young woman) to the arrogant young computer programmer who has no compunction about calling out Michele in front of her workforce; from the man Michele is having an affair with (aggressive and wimpy at the same time) to her rapist, whose sexual need for violence and control over women makes him the ultimate weakling. Women are the stronger sex here. Given the haplessness of the men around them, they have to be. And so the hardnosed reaction Michele shows to being raped is, in the film’s scheme, an instinctive part of surviving in a world where you’re the one burdened with being the adult.

If Michele has any predecessor in the movies it’s Lucia, the housewife played by Joan Bennett in Max Ophuls’s great 1949 noir *The Reckless Moment*. Lucia’s husband, an engineer, is away on a European job and in her letters to him she talks of how tough she finds their separation, how tough it is that the responsibilities of running the family are now all on her. What we see tells a different story. Lucia has to deal with the surrender of her privacy to

a family that is constantly underfoot, and then with covering up when her daughter accidentally murders her sleazy boyfriend and the blackmailer (James Mason) who turns up shortly after. *The Reckless Moment* assumes that the woman is really the head of the family and thus it's crucial she be stronger and more capable than anyone in it. (You can't imagine that absent husband being any better at handling things than Lucia.)

Huppert's Michele has escaped those traditional roles. She's divorced, she founded and runs her own company, she takes the lover she wants (even if it is her best friend's husband). And yet she still exists in a world where women have to be better than everyone else – not to prove they're as good but because nobody else is *as* good. The daring of *Elle* is in some ways more satisfying than its conclusions. Verhoeven's refusal to spell out his meanings keeps those conclusions elusive. But in its world of predators and milquetoasts who are often one and the same, one thing remains constant: a woman's work is never done.