

# *Elle*: The latest offering from Paul Verhoeven

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*Directed by Paul Verhoeven; written by David Birke, based on the novel by Philippe Djian*

Dutch-born director Paul Verhoeven's new film is *Elle*, made in France, with Isabelle Huppert, who received an Academy Award nomination for her performance. Huppert plays a woman who is brutally raped in the opening sequence of the film, then proceeds to go about her daily life with apparent utter composure and even develops a relationship with her attacker (or so it seems).

Huppert is a very fine actress, but *Elle*, based on a 2012 novel by French writer Philippe Djian, is a psychologically implausible work virtually from beginning to end. Bertolt Brecht once suggested that conventional acting, including the exceptional variety, involved "coating a sham with as much truth as possible." This is a case in point. Huppert has the skill to take all the somewhat absurd strands of *Elle*, subdue them with her personality and skill, and mold them into something quasi-believable. But, in the end, that doesn't solve or conceal the film's problems.

Michèle Leblanc (Huppert) is the financially successful owner of a video game company, who lives on her own, with a cat for company, in a large house. As noted above, she is sexually assaulted as *Elle* opens. A few days later in a posh restaurant, she announces the fact to her best friend and business associate, Anna (Anne Consigny), with whose husband, Robert (Christian Berkel), also present, Michèle is having a joyless affair, and her own, financially desperate ex-husband, Richard (Charles Berling). They are all aghast she hasn't reported the attack to the authorities. We learn soon afterward that Michèle is wary of the police because of their treatment of her at the time, when she was 10 years old, that her father slaughtered 27 people in the family's immediate neighborhood!

At work, Michèle has a showdown with a rebellious game designer by reminding him that she is the "boss." There's female empowerment for you. An obscene CGI animation of Michèle circulates around the office, and she offers one of her other employees €10,000—while practicing at a gun range—for the identity of its creator.

For the flimsiest reasons, she accidentally but very seriously pepper-sprays her ex-husband. He, it turns out, has

begun a relationship with a much younger graduate student and yoga teacher, Hélène (Vimala Pons). Michèle, who seems immune to every mundane sentiment one would expect her to possess, becomes unaccountably jealous.

The absurdities and excesses pile up. Her attacker returns, and this time she manages to stab him in the hand and unmask him. Nonetheless, when she has a car accident—returning from a visit to the prison where she discovers her father has hanged himself!—she phones her rapist for assistance. They begin a relationship of sorts. He is only sexually capable when she resists...

Eventually, Michèle comes to her senses—or has she plotted this all along?—and sets a trap for the psychopath.

All in all, this is a pretty foolish film. It does have some blackly comic moments, and Huppert manages to maintain her dignity and exude a certain ironic attitude toward the goings-on throughout.

Among other things, one suspects, Verhoeven wanted to make a point about the self-pity and self-absorption associated with gender politics and related trends. There's some legitimacy to that, but it is limited. (He also takes some scattered shots at organized religion and "faith.")

In an interview with *Film Journal International*, Verhoeven commented, "There's certainly a tendency in Hollywood to make sure that the audience won't be offended. Because of this, Hollywood directors tend to move away from reality and portray politically correct situations, although the reality of life is that people aren't politically correct at all. You can even look at the U.S. government, which has been lying and cheating us for years. I'd argue that you shouldn't be politically correct because you'll then be stuck in a fantasyland."

One can concur with the filmmaker that the American government "has been lying and cheating us for years" without agreeing that anti-"political correctness" or "offending the audience," in and of itself, serves as a viable artistic (or political) platform. Verhoeven is giving himself far too much leeway here. "Political correctness" can also be attacked from the extreme right, in the guise of a phony populism, as we see today in Washington and elsewhere.

No doubt, people are complicated and capable of all

manner of things. Life too in general is contradictory—but not simply in any manner one chooses. Things transform and turn into their opposites, but, again, the process is not merely arbitrary. A pencil eraser doesn't turn into a standing lamp. A sparrow, all things considered, cannot act like a wolverine.

What happens to Michèle is brutal and terrible, and her response is simply not believable, as much as Huppert exerts herself—in this case, in the form of exceptional self-restraint. The businesswoman would have to be a psychopath herself, and not simply damaged by her past. Like all secondary or tertiary talents, Verhoeven wants his protagonist to have her cake and eat it too. That is, he arranges the drama so that Michèle exhibits extreme or sado-masochistic tendencies in certain situations, but also has the sharpest and most rational—and drollest—reactions to everyone and everything else.

Over the course of his lengthy film career, Verhoeven's "transgressiveness" has always been questionable. Born in 1938, he began making feature films in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s (*Turkish Delight*, *Soldiers of Orange*, *Spetters*, *The 4th Man*), before making a splash in Hollywood with *RoboCop*, *Total Recall* and *Basic Instinct*, in 1987-92. After the failure of *Showgirls* (1995), he returned with *Starship Troopers* (1997).

His early American films had a certain vulgar charm and garishness, with hints of anti-establishment sentiment. *RoboCop*, set in a not-so future Detroit on the verge of collapse and centered on a superhuman cyborg policeman manipulated by a giant conglomerate, had the most of the latter. One commentator referred to it as "a critique of the other super-cop movies—a chuckling but morally serious indictment of their fascist tendencies."

In a very different context, a critic once wrote of certain works, "Although presented with a straight face, these inventions have an engaging lightness of touch." Unfortunately, Verhoeven's "inventions" lacked the "lightness of touch."

There was always something self-conscious and self-serving about his resorting to "sex and violence." It was the answer to everything in social and political life to which Verhoeven had no real answer, and the solution to every dramatic or artistic problem for which he had no real solution. His films have that overall quality, of hastily jumping from one scene to the next before anything is truly worked through to the end.

These weren't only his dilemmas. Verhoeven, a child in wartime Holland, belonged to a generation that came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One thinks of figures like Brian De Palma in the US and perhaps Dario Argento and some of the other "giallo" filmmakers in Italy. A sincere

reaction against postwar conformism and sexual repression tended to be their highest artistic and intellectual attainment. At the same time, the relative prosperity and comfort of the postwar period for middle-class layers engendered self-indulgence.

Verhoeven and the others (especially the Europeans) grew up and matured during the decades that began with the Nazi horrors and extended to the Vietnam war era. They witnessed the mass violence and cruelty without ever having much grasp of the social and historical processes that gave them birth. Everyone, in their impressionistic and fairly facile view, becomes a potential homicidal maniac, and murderousness can appear at any moment. Verhoeven told an interviewer decades ago, "When people who behave nice suddenly turn out to be monsters and criminals and kill you; when danger is around every corner..."

So, there are numerous echoes of Alfred Hitchcock, among others, only without Hitchcock's seriously anti-establishment sentiments and artistic meticulousness and commitment, expressed above all in the way he meaningfully cuts between shots, in building up emotional states.

Verhoeven's skepticism and his distrust of people, deepened by the political difficulties of the last several decades, have hardened into an inconsistent but generally dark and chilly view of humanity. None of the critics mention it, of course, but the repellent character of nearly every member of this upper-middle-class milieu is one of *Elle*'s weakest aspects.

Huppert and Berling, because they are especially subtle and interesting actors, capable of giving dimension to their characters whatever else is going on, have their appealing moments. However, Michèle's lover is a selfish horror; her son is a weakling and her daughter-in-law a domineering shrew; her mother is something of a monster, addicted to cosmetic surgery, and her youthful boyfriend a crude, transparent opportunist; her neighbors are religious fanatics or worse; the game designers are narrow and nasty; and Michèle's father is a mass murderer!

This is not genuine social or moral criticism, or wholehearted satire, as one finds in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939), for example (to which *Elle* has unthinkingly been compared by some critics and by Verhoeven himself), but something that tends more toward unconscious, muddy misanthropy.



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