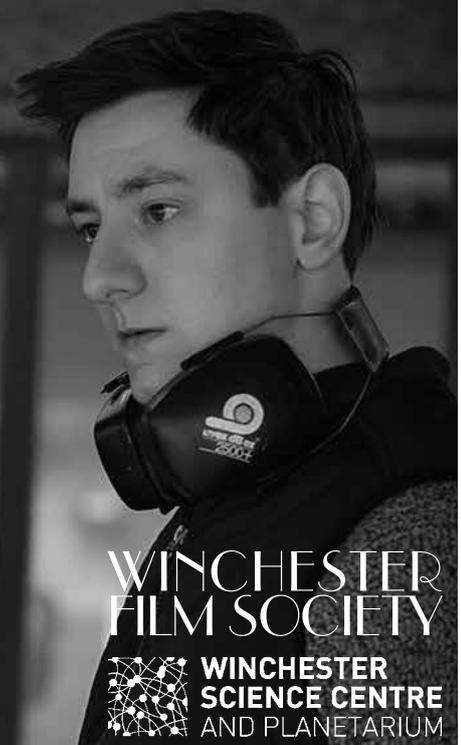


ELLE

FRANCE

PAUL VERHOEVEN



WINCHESTER
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There are certain films that could only have been made by one particular actor. It's not just that they're ideally cast. These films are all about that actor's presence: they grow out of it, they explore and express it.

Elle is pre-eminently such a piece of work. Although it was timid of the Academy Awards to shortlist Isabelle Huppert for an Oscar but not recognise the film itself, there was also a sort of justice to it. She doesn't just give an astoundingly charismatic performance in the part of Michèle Leblanc, at a level that it's quite impossible to imagine any other actress matching. She gives herself. She is the film.

It's a story that knocks you flat with the first scene, Michèle's being brutally raped in her lavish home by a masked stranger — and then just keeps moving on. She doesn't report the attack, arms herself in case the man returns, and goes to work as normal, while disdainfully managing her wayward son and impossible mother. Michele, we begin to realise, is completely formidable, more or less contemptuous of all around her, refusing ever to let herself be defined by them. A heroine we have not seen before. That stinging clarity, that assertion of herself, that strength of will, that unyielding stare at the worst are all Huppert's own.

Although Huppert doesn't give cuddly interviews, they are absolutely lucid and explicit, and what she has been saying about what she does in *Elle* could not be more straightforward.

In one she stated: "I can't give people what I don't have. That's all I can say." Although she observes other

people minutely, that is not where her acting comes from. "Acting is imagination more than observation. I could have been locked in a room all my life and still been an actress." She described her working relationship with the film's director, Paul Verhoeven, thus: "It was almost like a documentary; he decided where to put the camera, then filmed whatever I did. Once he gave me the role, he said 'do whatever you want', and whatever I did was good by definition."

Some part of her power lies in her unique physical being. She is so tiny and so slender that at moments her head seems out of scale with her body: strikingly beautiful as she is, there is also something almost freakish about her. Such a force of nature in such a fragile-seeming frame! In *Elle* you just watch her face constantly, transfixed, if not aghast. There are the most extraordinary flickers through her eyes and mouth, almost imperceptible smiles of malice and even contempt, as well as expressions of determination and almost inhuman composure.

Her actual character in this film is not realistic, to be sure, but it is incontrovertibly there, shown to us, and we are left to construe it for ourselves as best we can. It's a challenge but one we must rise to, for she is compelling our attention, whether or not we can make sense of her. The film constantly surprises you, thrills you, keeps you off balance, never letting you arrive at a complete explanation — "the film moves too fast for that", as Huppert has commented with satisfaction.

David Sexton, London Evening Standard

WRITER: David Birke, based on the novel by Phillippe Djian **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Stéphane Fontaine **MUSIC:** Anne Dudley
CAST: Michèle Isabelle Huppert | Patrick Laurent Lafitte | Anna Anne Consigny | Richard Charles Berling

VOTING FOR *PATERSON* A44 | B40 | C10 | D2 | E1 | Rating 82% | Attendance 104

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