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Elle (Cert 18)

Dir: Paul Verhoeven

Starring: Isabelle Huppert, Laurent Lafitte

Sponsor: Dr Roderick J. Ørner

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Synopsis: Michèle Leblanc, a successful businesswoman, is attacked and raped in her own home. She keeps this from her friends and family and does not contact the police. Following TV revelations about her past, she is then attacked again. This time, she does tell people, including her best friend Anna and Anna's husband Robert, with whom Michèle is having an affair; but again, she does not go to the police. She receives disturbing anonymous texts and video at work. At a gathering of family and friends, she flirts with Patrick, a neighbour. Later, she is attacked a third time: the attacker is revealed as Patrick. After a car accident, she calls Patrick for help. She decides to end her affair with Robert and tells Patrick she will report him to the police. He attacks her again but her son appears and kills him

It begins with a cat, gazing nonchalantly and then slinking away - while, off-screen, we hear what could be pain or pleasure. We quickly realise that the cat's owner, Michèle (Isabelle Huppert) is being raped by a masked attacker. Her reactions after the event are also nonchalant; she does not contact the police and, when finally telling friends over dinner, shrugs it off. Michèle is, however, a complicated woman, who likes to compartmentalise her life. Privately, she begins stocking up on weapons, changing her locks and learning self-defence skills.

Within these first ten minutes, Paul Verhoeven deftly sketches a social milieu that, in an affectionate homage to the masters, is part Claude Chabrol (due to Huppert's star presence) and part Luis Buñuel: under the pleasant facade of 'sophisticated' bourgeois manners lie perverse power games and secret double lives. Distinct from the more detached 'ensemble view' favoured by those directors, Verhoeven and screenwriter David Birke tell this complex tale by closely observing the enigmatic, ever-surprising behaviour of Michèle, who is among the most memorable screen creations of the past decade.

Like everything else in *Elle*, cats return as a beguiling motif. When Michèle impulsively tells her neighbour Patrick about the horrendous murders committed 40 years previously by Georges, her father, she adds that he killed several cats too., "but that never gets a mention". Michèle has good reason to be wary of both the media and police, since a famous photograph of her as a child alongside Georges taints her as a possible psychopath. This is why she does not report her serial rape. But the film digs deeper as it unfolds, and we gradually grasp that Michèle's psychology involves a refusal to be branded and treated as a victim - plus a desire for control (over people and situations) that is often deliciously wicked. Verhoeven invites us to enjoy Michèle's behaviour, no matter how morally dubious it seems. This is what makes *Elle* so special and so captivating.

At first glance, it would appear to be a typical mystery, leaning on a simple question of identity: who is that masked man? In the



manner he perfected in *Basic Instinct* (1992), Verhoeven multiplies clues and suspects. There's the brutish Kurt at work, antagonistic towards Michèle. There are mysterious text messages on Michèle's phone, somewhere between erotic enticement and menace, which may come from her lover-on-the-side. There's an obscene video that goes around the office computers, superimposing Michèle's face on an animated woman being raped. One by one, these possibilities are dealt with - but the film has more on its mind than scattering a bunch of narrative red herrings.

Elle superimposes several world, or social sectors. At work, a code of professional alienation rules; the gruesomely graphic rape in a video-game is not to be confused with the real thing. On another level, devout religious belief plays a key role, also involving psychological 'splitting': after all, Georges committed his murders after being forbidden to 'bless' his neighbours' children. Above all, there is family, (four generations in this case), and the tangled ties it imposes. The central relationship, from this angle, is between Michèle and her son Vincent. Michèle muses that perhaps, at his birth, they missed out on that profound bonding or 'imprinting', known from the animal kingdom. It is precisely an assumed 'imprint' of this kind - of Georges's monstrosity on to her - that Michèle, through every effort, flees. Meanwhile Michèle's mother keeps insisting on a more compassionate view: Georges is still human, still a father....But then, what of Vincent's absolute commitment to the baby that - as everyone can plainly see but only Michèle will assert aloud - is not biologically his? Something other than blood ties matter here; the type of shared experience that Michèle will come to appreciate at the denouement.

Elle has been frequently misdescribed as a revenge tale. Michèle protects herself and undertakes her own investigation, but definitely does not seek revenge against her attacker - even once she knows who it is. In its final third, the film goes in a less predictable and more disquieting direction. Michèle toys with her rapist, and begins a strange relationship with him. But, against all likely odds, she turns her story into one that is positively therapeutic in its affirmation.

Near the end, Michèle is quizzed by police. As ever, she keeps her cards close to her chest. This leads to a delightful pay-off that depends on every secret piece of information we, as viewers, have come to accumulate about her. As the interrogator recaps the case, Michèle replies, with a slight shrug, "Who could imagine such a

thing?”

Credits

Michèle LeBlanc	Isabelle Huppert
Patrick	Laurent Lafitte
Anna	Anne Consigny
Richard	Charles Berling
Rebecca	Virginie Efira
Irène	Judith Magre
Robert	Christian Berkel
Vincent	Jonas Bloquet
Josie	Alice Isaaz
Hélène	Vimala Pons
Ralf	Raphaël Lenglet
Kevin	Arthur Mazet
Kurt	Lucas Prisor
Philip Kwan	Hugo Conzelmann
Omar	Stéphane Bak
Director	Paul Verhoeven
Screenplay	David Birke
Director of Photography	Stéphane Fontaine
Art Director	Job ter Burg
Original music	Anne Dudley
Sound	Jean-Paul Mugel, Alexis Place, Katia Boutin
Costume	Nathalie Raoul

**France/Germany/Belgium
2015
130 mins**

Another View

Paul Verhoeven's *Elle* is not an easy film to like. A black comedy/thriller based around a brutal rape and the female victim's eventual revenge is bound to be controversial. And it's debatable whether many other actresses apart from Isabelle Huppert could pull off such a delicate balancing act. Aside from the plot, Verhoeven casts an almost impossible array of grotesque characters. These include Michèle's (Huppert) botox-filled, aged mother and her toy boy lover, an ultra-Catholic neighbour, a milksop son and his overbearing, aggressive girlfriend. Michèle herself is a complex character who elicits little natural sympathy. A successful businesswoman used to wielding power, she categorically refuses to have her life altered by the violent attack. *Elle* is not a film for fence-sitters. Either the audience buys into Michèle's reaction to the rape or it finds Verhoeven's cat-and-mouse antics between victim and aggressor misogynistic and way out-of-line. Either way, Huppert's performance is flawless. She is the mistress of cool detachment used to perfection here. And she handles the dark comedy beautifully, delivering some excellent one-liners in a deft, throw-away fashion and exuding disbelief with a mere lift of an eyebrow. Love it or hate it, *Elle* is a shocking look at contemporary sexual politics.

After a savage sexual assault by a masked intruder, Michèle chooses not to go to the police and it's life as usual as the CEO of a profitable computer gaming company. Despite the occasional flashback to the attack, she devotes her time to her spineless son (Jonas Bloquet) and his pregnant girlfriend (Alice Isaaz), her mother (Judith Magre) and her latest gigolo, her wayward husband (Charles Berling), his new girlfriend (Vimala Pons) and her own demanding lover (Christian Berkel). There is also a growing fascination with neighbours Patrick (Laurent Lafitte of the Comédie Française) and Rebecca (Virginie Efira), not to mention her feelings for a

father she hasn't seen in thirty years. As Michèle tries to deal with the attack on her own terms, she realises she's being watched and the nightmare is not over yet.

Elle is adapted from the award-winning 2012 novel "Oh..." by French-Armenian writer Philippe Djian and was to be set originally in the US. Verhoeven himself chose Paris after saying that "no American actress would ever take on such an amoral movie". True or not, Huppert's outstanding performance was recently rewarded by a Golden Globe for best actress. She is now tipped as a possible nominee for a Best Actress Oscar although interestingly the film itself is not up for a statue. After years spent in the movie-wilderness, for Verhoeven fans *Elle* is a promising return to form.

Our next screening: March 2nd, 7.30pm The Other Side of Hope (dir Aki Kaurismäki. Finland 2017. Cert 12A)

Finnish auteur Aki Kaurismäki brings his trademark lugubrious style to a compassionate story rooted in the refugee crisis that has beset Europe in the last 2 years. Khaled Ali, a Syrian migrant, emerges from hiding as a stowaway on a coal freighter in Helsinki harbour, determined to find his sister, who's also in Europe. During his stay, he encounters state bureaucracy, some skinheads, an idiosyncratic businessman and what it's like to work in quite possibly the strangest restaurant ever created. This film is compassionate, drolly funny and never less than wholly engaging.

Programme news

The following 3 films - all released since the programme went to print - have been selected to complete the season.

April 6th Land of Mine (Denmark 2015. Cert 15). This tense drama explores issues of post-war revenge, compassion and forgiveness. Sergeant Rasmussen, a Danish NCO, is in charge of a group of Nazi POWs, teenage conscripts forced into the German army and later captured, who are made to clear thousands of landmines from Danish beaches. Rasmussen is initially hostile towards his charges, but as he gets to know them, his view begins to change. Nominated for Best Film not in the English Language, 2017

April 20: Hotel Salvation (India 2016. Cert 12a). Following a prophetic dream, 77 year-old Daya demands to travel to the sacred ghats of Varanasi to achieve salvation in his final days. His overworked son Rajiv finds himself roped into accompanying him to Mukti Bhawan (Hotel Salvation) where Daya finds a new lease of life among the residents of this last stop hostel. Shubhashish Bhutiani's debut feature is a charming drama about a father and son as they try to navigate through complexities of family life.

May 4: Call Me By Your Name (Italy 2017. Cert 15). In Northern Italy in 1983, seventeen year-old Elio begins a relationship with visiting Oliver, his father's research assistant, with whom he bonds over his emerging sexuality, their Jewish heritage, and the beguiling Italian landscape. Luca Guadagnino follows *I Am Love* and *A Bigger Splash* with another finely judged study of the complexities of love. The film has been universally praised since its release and is nominated this year for 4 Oscars and 2 BAFTAs

Archive classic

As part of our 65th anniversary, the Committee plans to include an 'archive classic' in the 2018-19 season. Over the next few weeks, please take a moment to look at the montages that play before each film and let us have your suggestions, no later than March 23rd. The committee will then shortlist (subject to availability) and ask members to vote on which film to include in the new season, which will be selected on May 9th. More details will be announced soon.

Other events

This year, the Society is supporting both the RAF Centenary and the BFI Cinemathèque project with screenings in June and July. Details will be confirmed as soon as possible.