

Twisting the Knife Four Films by CLAUDE CHABROL

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“Films with a message just make me laugh.”

“Stupidity is infinitely more fascinating than intelligence. Intelligence has its limits while stupidity has none.”

“We live in an era where pizzas show up faster than the police.”

- Claude Chabrol

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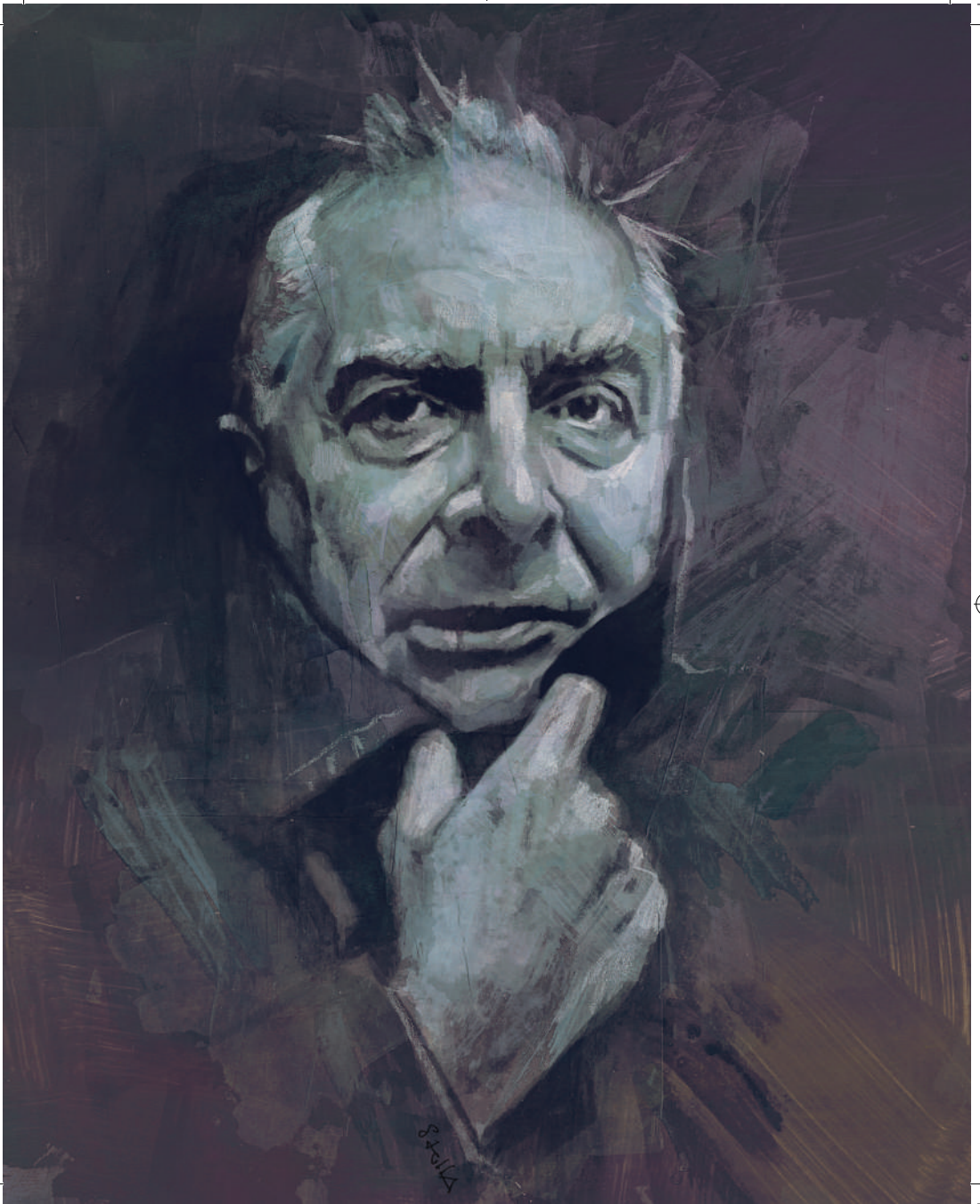
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***The Swindle
(Rien Ne Va Plus)***

CAST

Isabelle Huppert Betty

Michel Serrault Victor

François Cluzet Maurice

Jean-François Balmer Monsieur K

Jackie Berroyer Robert Chatillon

CREW

Written and Directed by **Claude Chabrol**

Produced by **Marin Karmitz**

Director of Photography **Eduardo Serra, AFC**

Editor **Monique Fardoulis**

Music by **Matthieu Chabrol**



The Color of Lies
(Au Coeur Du
Mensonge)

CAST

Sandrine Bonnaire Vivianne Sterne

Jacques Gamblin René Sterne

Antoine de Caunes Germain-Roland Desmot

Valeria Bruni Tedeschi Frédérique Lesage

Bernard Verley Inspecteur Loudun

CREW

Directed by **Claude Chabrol**

Produced by **Marin Karmitz**

Screenplay by **Odile Barski & Claude Chabrol**

Director of Photography **Eduardo Serra, AFC**

Editor **Monique Fardoulis**

Music by **Matthieu Chabrol**



Nightcap *(Merci Pour Le* *Chocolat)*

CAST

Isabelle Huppert Marie-Claire Muller

Jacques Dutronc André Polonski

Anna Mouglalis Jeanne Pollet

Rodolphe Pauly Guillaume Polonski

Brigitte Catillon Louise Pollet

CREW

Directed by **Claude Chabrol**

Produced by **Marin Karmitz**

Screenplay by **Caroline Eliacheff & Claude Chabrol**

Based on the novel *The Chocolate Cobweb* by **Charlotte Armstrong**

Director of Photography **Renato Berta**

Editor **Monique Fardoulis**

Music by **Matthieu Chabrol**



The Flower of Evil *(La Fleur Du Mal)*

CAST

Nathalie Baye Anne Charpin-Vasseur

Benoît Magimel François Vasseur

Suzanne Flon Aunt Line

Mélanie Doutey Michèle Charpin-Vasseur

Bernard Le Coq Gérard Vasseur

CREW

Directed by **Claude Chabrol**

Produced by **Marin Karmitz**

Screenplay by **Caroline Eliacheff & Louise L. Lambrichs**
and **Claude Chabrol**

Director of Photography **Eduardo Serra, AFC**

Editor **Monique Fardoulis**

Music by **Matthieu Chabrol**







Les Femmes Impénétrable: Chabrol's Women

by Sean Hogan

The notion of Claude Chabrol as the French Hitchcock is by now a long-standing critical cliché. Like many clichés, there is undoubtedly an element of truth to it; Chabrol and Eric Rohmer published a seminal book on the English director in 1957, in which they devoted particular attention to the notion of guilt transference in Hitchcock's films; a theme that Chabrol would subsequently go on to explore quite extensively in his own work. But for all the undoubted kinship between the two directors, the variations between their work are just as instructive as the (often relatively superficial) similarities.

Always the show man, one of Hitchcock's many famously pithy filmmaking quotes was to "Film your murders like love scenes, and film your love scenes like murders." Wittily perverse, as was so often the case with Hitch, but the proof of it can be found in his films, where the set-pieces of death and violence still rank amongst the most celebrated scenes in cinema history. But while there are also plenty of murders in Chabrol's work, they are usually perfunctory, even throwaway; blink and you might miss them. The business of murder is not something that overly interests this particular Hitchcockian disciple; very often the killings take place offscreen, or are resolutely uncinematic in means (slow poisoning is a common method of murder in Chabrol). As the director himself commented, he was less interested in the act of murder than in "the human behavior of people involved in murder."¹

Human behavior. Notoriously, Hitchcock pronounced himself disinterested in such matters, claiming his only priority was the formal quality of his work. Although there is plenty of evidence to the contrary in the films themselves, one pronounced difference between the English director and his Gallic counterpart is Chabrol's abiding interest in his female characters. Despite certain obvious exceptions, Hitchcock was more often than not preoccupied with the plight of male characters, most famously in the films he made with his two preferred alter egos, Cary Grant and James Stewart.

With Chabrol, it is quite the opposite. The French director is most heavily identified with his actresses, and two in particular: Stéphane Audran, during the first part of his career; and Isabelle Huppert, from 1978's *Violette Nozière* onwards. (Not so much the Hitchcock blonde, then, as the Chabrolian redhead.) The two women make for an interesting comparison; Audran, a fine actress in her own right, has an unmistakable air of high fashion about her, and while she is perfectly plausible essaying decadents and bourgeois housewives (*Les Biches* [1968], *Just Before Nightfall* [*Juste avant la nuit*, 1971]), she seems far less at ease when called upon to portray a working-class barmaid/ex-stripper (*The Breach* [*La Rupture*, 1970]). Huppert, on the other hand, is equally comfortable playing a small-town postmistress (*La Cérémonie* [1995]) as an upper-middle class sociopath (*Nightcap* [*Merci Pour Le Chocolat*, 2000]). Chabrol, of course, was married to Audran for several years, and after they divorced in 1978, her appearances in his work became more sporadic. Indeed, there is perhaps a sense with the later post-Audran films of the director revisiting certain themes and situations from his earlier work with her, but with a greater liberty to explore what qualities different performers might bring to familiar Chabrolian scenarios. So it is that Audran's victimized mother in *The Breach* becomes the similarly tormented Emmanuelle Béart in *Torment* (*L'Enfer*, 1994), or her rural headmistress driven to shield a serial murderer from detection in *The Butcher* (*Le Boucher*, 1970) becomes

Sandrine Bonnaire's protective wife in *The Color of Lies* (*Au Cœur Du Mensonge*, 1999).

Irrespective of casting choices, however, there is an identifiable thread running through Chabrol's studies of female characters; namely, the fact that they tend to be enigmatically opaque in their motives, ultimately unknowable. Male protagonists in Chabrol are often portrayed as brutish or violent, but we always know *why* they kill; because of past trauma (*The Butcher*), or jealousy (*The Unfaithful Wife* [*La Femme Infidèle*, 1969]), or for revenge (*This Man Must Die* [*Que La Bête Meure*, 1969]). But the motives of his women must remain forever ambiguous. *Violette Nozière*, based on a real-life murder case, was one of Chabrol's most acclaimed films, but while he commented that "I fell in love with Violette long before I ever understood her"², the film itself does not attempt to explain away her murderous actions. Does Violette kill her father because – as she claims – he has been abusing her ever since she was a child? Chabrol himself claimed not to believe that was the case, but Huppert's studiously cryptic performance gives us no clues either way, and the film itself leaves the matter entirely open to interpretation. (The director's skepticism aside, the scenes showing Violette alone with her father certainly carry an uncomfortably intimate *frisson*.)

Actress and director would go on to examine another enigmatic murderess in *Nightcap*. This time, Huppert's character is not driven to kill by the desire to escape her circumstances, but to preserve them. Her obsessive need to be the sole object of her husband's devotion drives her to murderous extremes, and no one – not the man's first wife, nor his offspring – can be allowed to intrude on their perfect bourgeois marriage. But once again, we are not given any broad psychological explanations for her madness. Huppert's character says, simply, "I have a knack for doing wrong," and as the camera lingers on her impassively tear-stained face in the film's closing shot, we are left to discern the rest.

Regardless, the director always insisted he wasn't interested in ambiguity for its own sake; what concerned him above all was not judging his characters. Now, whether this is down to his own particular notion of Original Sin (in Chabrol, *everyone* is guilty, so how can anyone possibly be judged?), or due to a Marxist-influenced conviction that, as critic David Thomson surmised, "the way Chabrol seemed to explain murder away is that society's crimes are far worse"³ is open to question. Still, Thomson's thesis is certainly borne out by certain films in the director's oeuvre. For instance, while discussing his motivations for making *Les Biches*, Chabrol stated that "[The rich] can buy people, and the poor have to submit, until they revolt, and the only possible revolt is destruction. It is from a Marxist point of view but it is not political at all."⁴

One might plausibly dispute the latter sentiment, but what is beyond question is that when Chabrol makes films in this quasi-Marxist mode, he inevitably places female characters in the position of revolutionaries, rising up against an oppressive patriarchal class. Even in *Les Biches*, which depicts the overthrow of a rich woman (Stéphane Audran) by the spurned lesbian lover (Jacqueline Sussard) she picked up off the streets, Audran is coded as the film's dominant patriarchal figure; she is sexually ambiguous, owns and pays for everything, and the film's male characters – a gay couple, the dullard paramour Audran steals from Sussard – are shown as ineffectual and entirely subservient to her. And in the later *La Cérémonie*, the proletarian killers that revolt and slaughter a bourgeois family are both women, as played by Sandrine Bonnaire and Huppert. (Indeed, Huppert's character might even be seen as a later incarnation of Violette Nozière, stepped out of the distant past to instruct her younger acolyte in the ways of revolutionary murder.)

His above comments to the contrary, there is another political strain to be found in Chabrol, one that might stop short of espousing outright revolution, but is nevertheless mercilessly precise in its dissection of



French provincial corruption. And yet again, it is women who are forced to confront the rot at the heart of the venal society they inhabit. In *Red Wedding* (*Les Noces Rouges*, 1973), Stéphane Audran plays the wife of a corrupt mayor, who is cuckolding her husband with his newly-appointed deputy. When the mayor discovers the affair, he uses it to coerce the deputy into supporting an illicit land deal, but, unwilling to be blackmailed, the couple instead decide to kill him. When their own crime is discovered, the couple do not attempt to flee or deny their guilt; once again, Chabrol shows us that the only possible response to society's crimes is violence.

In *La Fleur Du Mal* (2003), Chabrol goes even further in his depiction of small-town political corruption. This time the politician is a woman (Nathalie Baye), running for office in the municipal elections. But after an anonymous poison pen letter smearing her family's past is released into the local community, a chain of secrets is slowly uncovered. We learn that Baye's grandfather was a Nazi collaborator who informed on his own son, only to be subsequently murdered by his vengeful daughter Line. History begins to repeat itself; Baye's husband is subsequently revealed as a covertly fascist thug, who is killed by his stepdaughter after he attempts to rape her. However, in the face of patriarchal intimidation and brutality, the women of the family find strength in solidarity; rather than see her step-niece's life ruined, the now-elderly Line tells the girl she will take responsibility for the murder, thus bringing the cycle of killings full circle. In an ironic postscript, we watch Baye returning home to celebrate her successful re-election, unaware that her husband's lifeless body is awaiting discovery upstairs.

Even when Chabrol concerns himself with outright victims, too beaten down or intimidated to revolt, his focus is inevitably on oppressed women. "If there are men, women are the victims,"⁵ he stated unequivocally, and the director's enduring belief in this view is certainly borne out by the pairing of *The Breach* and *Torment*, films separated in his career by almost

25 years. *The Breach* is one of Chabrol's most unusual works, a quasi-horror movie detailing the attempts of a bourgeois businessman to smear his daughter-in-law's reputation, in a bid to ensure she does not win custody of her child from his son. As mentioned earlier, casting Stéphane Audran as a victimized proletariat woman is something of a stretch, but what cannot be faulted is Chabrol's clinical dissection of the repressive societal forces that threaten her with ruination. In one key scene, Audran and her lawyer ride a tram while she describes to him the sequence of events that have conspired to bring her to the brink of disaster. During her account, Chabrol frequently cuts away to jarringly abrupt inserts of the tram mechanisms. The visual symbolism is clear; there has never been any real choice for Audran's character. For women like her, life moves in one direction and one direction only.

In *Torment*, based on a script originally developed by Henri-Georges Clouzot, Emmanuelle Béart plays another victimized woman, this time the target of obsessive spousal jealousy rather than moral and classist opprobrium. While Béart's casting was also criticized in certain quarters, the actress is able to convincingly shift registers between flighty sexpot and concerned wife/mother, and if her portrayal of the character can appear inconsistent at times, that is only because we view her solely through her psychotic husband's eyes; as his (unreliable) assessment of his wife's actions and motives shift wildly over the course of the film's narrative, so do our own. Both *The Breach* and *Torment* end with their tormented heroines seeking refuge in madness; Chabrol's point seems to be (à la RD Laing) that insanity is the only rational response to patriarchal oppression.

Madness and murder. So often in the director's films, these seem to be the only two conceivable options left to women. But while Chabrol may leave us guessing as to exactly why his female characters make certain fatally irrevocable choices (and that delicious ambiguity is surely something



that keeps us coming back to his work several decades later, to discover further sly Chabrolian subtleties), we are never left in any doubt as to the nature of the oppressive societal forces that have made the need for such choices inevitable. Hitchcock may have puckishly commented “Torture the women!”, but it is Chabrol’s films that show us *why* they are being tortured, and demonstrate him to be one of the most brilliantly empathic directors of women of his generation.

Sean Hogan is a UK writer and filmmaker. His feature credits include the films Future Shock! The Story of 2000AD, The Borderlands, and The Devil’s Business. He has written two award-nominated books of cinema metafiction, England’s Screaming and Three Mothers, One Father. A third volume in the sequence, Twilight’s Last Screaming, will be published in 2022.

Footnotes

¹Ebert, Roger, “This Man Must Commit Murder” (*The New York Times*, 1970)

²Quoted in Thomson, David, *Have You Seen...?* (London, Allen Lane, 2008) pg. 945.

³Thomson, David, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (London, André Deutch, 1995) pg.120.

⁴Waddy, Stacy, “The Bargains People Make: Stacy Waddy interviews Claude Chabrol” (*The Guardian*, 1968)

⁵Yakir, Dan, “The Magical Mystery World of Claude Chabrol” (*Film Quarterly*, April 1979)



It's All Fun and Games Until Someone Loses an Eye: *Rien Ne Va Plus* and Other Chabrolian Secrets

by Brad Stevens

When released in 1997, *The Swindle* (*Rien Ne Va Plus*) was promoted as Claude Chabrol's 50th theatrical feature. This already impressive figure (and there would be another seven titles to follow) presumably includes the four portmanteau films Chabrol contributed to during the 60s, but does not take into account his considerable television output, his documentary *L'Oeil de Vichy* (1993), or his advertising shorts. A minor point, perhaps. But then this is an oeuvre in which minor points are indistinguishable from major ones, in which humorous asides feel no less substantial than "serious" statements. Consider Chabrol's response to a question concerning the function of quotations from T. S. Eliot in *The Unfaithful Wife* (*La Femme infidèle*, 1968), *Honoré de Balzac* in *The Butcher* (*Le Boucher*, 1970), and Jean Racine in *The Breach* (*La Rupture*, 1970): "I'll be truthful. It's to give them substance. I need a degree of critical support for my films to succeed: without that they can fall flat on their faces. So, what do you have to do? You have to help the critics over their notices, right? So I give them a hand... I give them little things to grasp at. In *The Butcher* I stuck Balzac there in the middle, and they threw themselves on it like poverty upon the world. It's good not to leave them staring at a blank sheet of paper, not knowing how to begin... 'This film is definitely Balzacian,' and there you are; they're off. After that they can go on to say whatever they want."¹

Chabrol's admiration for Alfred Hitchcock (about whom he wrote, in collaboration with Eric Rohmer, a book-length study) is well known, and it is easy to detect an echo of the Master's slyly sardonic tone here.² For this is essentially a non-answer, one which exhorts the questioner to seek clarification in the work itself, rather than in declarations made by the author. But it is also a useful indicator of those tactics employed by the actual films, which routinely proceed as if they have secrets to impart. Repeatedly in Chabrol, we encounter gestures towards significance wherein the "doing" seems disproportionate to the "done": the light suddenly going on as Richard (André Jocelyn) surrenders to the police at the end of *Web of Passion* (*À Double Tour*, 1959); the "diabolical" flame surrounding Robert (Christophe Malavoy) during his initial meeting with Juliette (Mathilda May) in *The Cry of the Owl* (*Le Cri Du Hibou*, 1987); the scrabble game in *The Flower of Evil* (*La Fleur Du Mal*, 2003) in which the word "cache" ("concealed" or "hidden") is stressed. Perhaps the secret hinted at by Chabrol's remarks is something far darker than his jocular air implies – that thematic elaboration and critical reception are nothing more than an extended joke, a kind of con game.

The con game makes for an especially apt metaphor, given that the secrets (involving murder, infidelity, or schemes to make money illegally) Chabrol's characters hide from each other are as nothing compared to those they hide from themselves. The emphasis on looking is crucial, overlapping as it so often does with the need to conceal something (an act, a weapon, a corpse, a clue) before it can be revealed to the detective's gaze. Which begs the question of why Chabrol's sympathies tend to lie with his concealers rather than his revealers (Inspector Lavardin, in particular, comes across as wholly contemptible). Sexual relations (which require as much concealment as, and regularly lead to, murders) are central here, with several films – *The Cousins* (*Les Cousins*, 1959), *Wise Guys* (*Les Godelureaux*, 1960), *The Champagne Murders* (*Le Scandale*, 1967), *Jours Tranquilles à Clichy* (1989), *A Girl Cut in Two* (*La Fille Coupée En Deux*,

2007) – focusing on paired males whose repressed (and usually one-sided) homosexual yearnings can only be acted out via female go-betweens.

Chabrol has frequently been cast as a critic of the bourgeoisie, and there is little denying that those narratives with middle-class settings depict this world as a hive of neuroses. Yet the bohemian communities of *The Cousins*, *Wise Guys*, *Les Biches* (1968), and *Jours Tranquilles à Clichy* fare no better, and generally much worse, their rebellious non-conformists hurling defiance against the norms of a society whose worst tendencies they embody in a hideously distorted fashion. The culmination of all this is *La Cérémonie* (1995), in which we are asked to sympathize with both the bourgeois family and the proletarians who slaughter them – two positives that ultimately form a negative.

Indeed, given their atmosphere of breezy good humor, it is striking how everything emerges from negativity in Chabrol's films, any number of which might have been titled *Rien Ne Va Plus*, which translates literally as “nothing goes anymore” or more idiomatically as “nothing is going well anymore.”³³ Though *Nada* (1974) – in which left-wing terrorist Buenaventura Diaz (Fabio Testi) concludes that “State terrorism and leftist terrorism... are twin jaws of the same trap for fools” – has an even better, neater title. Discussing his politics with Ronald Bergan, the director insisted “I'm on the left because I'm not on the right. It's that simple.”³⁴ Hardly surprising, then, that whatever affirmation can be discerned here should result from a process of elimination. Those feminist concerns linking *Violette Nozière* (1977) with *A Story of Women* (*Une Affaire De Femmes*, 1988) do not exist *à priori*, but are merely the only possibilities remaining after every other prospect has been tried and found wanting. Even the more traditional feminism of *The Blood of Others* (1984) is articulated negatively, through a portrayal of fascism and anti-fascism which (in a radical departure from Simone de Beauvoir's source novel) sees these hypothetically opposed forces as two sides of



the same coin – or rather two equally matched opponents playing a game predicated upon the suppression of female agency. As Dieter Bergman (Sam Neill) tells Hélène Bertrand (Jodie Foster), “In chess, the queen is the most important piece on the board. She can move in any direction. Of course, she must be checked.”

It is in his emphasis on games that we find evidence of the (or a) “true” Chabrol. *The Swindle* is a key work in this respect, precisely because it feels so inconsequential. Chabrol freely admitted to sometimes accepting assignments because of the culinary possibilities proffered by their locations, and if the spy movies made during his “commercial” period – *The Tiger Likes Fresh Blood* (*Le Tigre Aime La Chair Fraîche*, 1964), *The Blue Panther* (*Marie Chantal Contre Dr. Kha*, 1965), *An Orchid for the Tiger* (*Le Tigre Se Parfume à La Dynamite*, 1965), and *The Road to Corinth* (*La Route de Corinthe*, 1967) – provide the clearest traces of such a motivation, *The Swindle* can surely be grouped with them.⁵ Its plot involves two con artists, played by Isabelle Huppert and Michel Serrault, who attempt to steal five million Swiss francs from Maurice Biagini (François Cluzet), the bag man for a crime syndicate, only to discover that Maurice’s superior, Monsieur K (Jean-François Balmer), has no compunctions about using violence to retrieve his money. Since the two swindlers address each other by variations on their current aliases – Huppert is Elizabeth Déroulède, or “Betty,” while Serrault is Emmanuel Victor, or simply “Victor” – we never learn their real names. But this is far from all we fail to learn about “Betty” and “Victor,” with even the sleeping arrangements in their Paris apartment and the campervan they share kept tantalizingly vague.⁶ Is their bond sexual, or purely professional? The text will not commit itself to either alternative. Victor is old enough to be the father of Betty (“Don’t worry, he could be my father” she tells Maurice), who at several points hails him as “Papa.” We will almost certainly construe this as an affectionate nickname, but Chabrol refuses to rule out the possibility that the couple are father and daughter.

What we do with this information (or lack of information) depends upon whether we take *The Swindle* as it appears to be presenting itself – as a light-hearted romp – or see it in a larger (auteurist) context. One of the most curious things about Chabrol is how frequently he approaches the subject of incest without rendering it explicit, adoption and illegitimacy being the usual factors referenced to portray familial relations as neither technically incestuous, nor entirely lacking in incestuous undertones. Already there in his debut, *Le Beau Serge* (1958), these hints can be found in *Ophélie* (1962), *The Champagne Murders*, *The Breach*, *Ten Days Wonder* (*La Décade Prodigieuse*, 1971), *Dr. M* (1990), *Nightcap* (*Merci Pour Le Chocolat*, 2000), *The Flower of Evil* (*La Fleur Du Mal*, 2003), and *The Bridesmaid* (*La Demoiselle D'Honneur*, 2004). The implications of incest in *The Swindle* position this as the “light” version of that extremely “dark” treatment the theme receives in two superficially very different works from 1978: the Canadian thriller *Blood Relatives* (*Les Liens De Sang*, adapted from one of Evan Hunter’s 87th Precinct novels he wrote under his pseudonym of Ed McBain), in which an entire society is defined in terms of incest and child abuse, and the French historical drama *Violette Nozière*, wherein it matters little whether Violette (Huppert)’s claim that she was raped by her father is true or false, since the familial unit is based on power structures which are abusive by nature. Elsewhere the topic is systematically obscured, so that in *Inspector Lavardin* (1986), a *policier* which makes sundry connections between its ageing males, the insinuations of incest swirling around Véronique (Hermine Clair) never take solid form, only becoming visible once we see all the men associated with her – including Lavardin (Jean Poiret), who, if his youthful romance had worked out differently, might have been her father – as scattered fragments of a single personality.

The Swindle – with its teasing insistence that the nameless protagonists might (or might not) be in a sexual relationship, might (or might not) be father and daughter – seems remarkably nonchalant in its assumption that human interactions are inherently deceptive. This thesis – beautifully

visualized by an apparent digression showing Brygida Ochaim performing a dance in which she is alternately concealed and revealed by her flowing sleeves – is underlined even by such peripheral details as the half-heard broadcast of a television show whose host describes how “Dominique falls for Christian, a classic affair until she realizes Christian is a woman.” And this deceptiveness becomes part of the game Chabrol is playing with his audience. Although Monsieur K is not properly introduced until later, he can be seen spying on Betty, Victor, and Maurice in the Swiss hotel. But only an unusually attentive spectator is likely to spot him, since he appears first among a group of dentists attending a conference, then at the extreme left of a frame occupied by many other hotel guests; when he subsequently stands behind those characters upon whom our attention will naturally be focused, camera and actors engage in a series of carefully choreographed movements designed to conceal his presence. Both here and subsequently, Monsieur K is accompanied by a blonde woman with curious sexual tastes (she insists on sucking Victor’s finger after Monsieur K has broken it). This nameless individual (played by Nathalie Kousnetzoff) is evidently the wife or lover of the almost equally nameless Monsieur K. Yet she is clearly young enough to be his daughter, the way he upbraids her suggesting a father reprimanding a mischievous child. Indeed, his final command to her – “I don’t want you to go out, so there!” - is anticipated by the man in *Sils Maria* who notes how “In every country parents are forbidding their children to go out.” Which is to say that this perverse twosome reflects, as in a mirror, the possibly incestuous Betty and Victor.

Doppelgängers of this kind, undoubtedly derived from Hitchcock and Fritz Lang, figure prominently in Chabrol, and are often aligned with his penchant for gameplaying, his fascination with abstract patterns relating to nothing outside themselves. We see this in *The Swindle* when Betty jokingly tells Victor that if he keeps overeating he will “end up in a wheelchair” – which is exactly where he does end up. This may be a

species of frivolity, but frivolity in these films always has its darker side (its doppelgänger, if you will). *The Champagne Murders*, for example, involves cousins Paul Wagner (Maurice Ronet) and Christine Belling (Yvonne Furneaux) fighting over ownership of the Wagner family name. And it is names, habitually significant for Chabrol, that are used in this important transitional work to either pair characters (Paul and Paula, Christine and Christopher), split them in two, or do both of these things at once: Christopher Belling (Anthony Perkins) recalls a time when he worked as a gigolo under the pseudonym “Jackie,” while Stéphane Audran’s noir siren disguises herself as a dowdy secretary called “Jacqueline.” It is, paradoxically, the very playfulness of this pattern that enables *The Champagne Murders* to reach a nihilistic conclusion in which the mutually destructive pairings are not suspended, but rather pursued – as they will be again in *Torment* (*L’Enfer*, 1993) – into an eternal spiral of hostility, a game that never ends. If *The Champagne Murders* serves as a prologue to Chabrol’s masterpieces of the late 60s/early 70s – a series of variations on the theme of infidelity and murder played out among a trio inveterately named Hélène, Charles, and Paul – their epilogue is the deliriously abstract *Dirty Hands* (*Les Innocents Aux Mains Sales*, 1975), in which the roles of conspirator, cuckold, and victim are constantly being recast, a process the closing sequence implies will continue into the afterlife. In its treatment of narrative as a “modernist” problem, the sportive *Dirty Hands* may be more ambitious than those classical dramas preceding it.

So it is apt that the “dark” figure of Monsieur K should cast a lengthy shadow over the “light” aspects of *The Swindle*. Many Chabrol films incorporate allegories of *mise en scène*, usually embedded in the activities of godlike authorial stand-ins – Théo Van Horn (Orson Welles) in *Ten Days Wonder*, Edouard Vangard (Jean Rochefort) in *Death Rite* (*Les Magiciens*, 1975), Dr. Marsfeldt (Alan Bates) in *Dr. M* – who maneuver people as if they were pieces on a chess board. This view of life as a game (which can be either won or lost) stands in marked contrast to Jacques Rivette’s emphasis on life



as theater, with all participants enjoying equal standing. When Chabrol makes *Alice* or *The Last Escapade* (*Alice ou La Dernière Fugue*, 1977), his response to *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (*Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau*, 1974), the Rivettian House of Fiction becomes a Kafkaesque prison whose rules are as rigid as they are incomprehensible, and through which the solitary heroine, Alice Carrol (Sylvia Kristel), wanders helplessly, achieving liberation only in death. The fact that Alice is among the few Chabrol protagonists with absolutely nothing to hide indicates the real nature of those neurotic masculine drives concealed elsewhere beneath the detective's supposedly disinterested desire to expose a suspect. Instead of a single god-author, *Alice* conjures up a succession of disdainful males who are simultaneously controlling *auteurs* and voyeuristic viewers, as if cinema itself were a nightmare in which men generate images of terrorized women for their own gratification. Monsieur K (whose sobriquet again evokes Kafka) emanates from the same nightmarish universe, one antithetical to that ludic atmosphere which dominated *The Swindle* before his arrival. The revelation, which Monsieur K stages (complete with operatic soundtrack) for Betty's benefit, that Maurice has been murdered – the camera tracking slowly towards a bathtub containing the latter's corpse, a spike lodged in its eye – marks a significant moment of disruption in a film Chabrol had hitherto appeared to regard as merely an amiable jaunt involving some familiar collaborators. The delightful exchange during which Betty – or more precisely Huppert – tells Maurice – or more precisely Cluzet – to “Take off those glasses, you look like Peter Sellers” suggested we were watching a diversion constructed around the charms of its stars. Such an amusement seemed unlikely to accommodate actual pain and death, and when I first saw *The Swindle*, I anticipated a plot twist in which Maurice's apparent demise proved to be yet another con, a matter of make-up and special effects.

Yet the spike in Maurice's eye is “real” enough, and signals that point at which the fun must end, a rupture addressed by the text itself; when Betty

returns from her encounter with the corpse, Monsieur K declares “We are obliged to change our tone. I’m sorry, but times are tough.” As one of the pivotal figures in the formulation of *la politique des auteurs*, Chabrol was better situated than most to understand that cinematic authorship was a highly contested category, and if Monsieur K is an author, he is more of a hard-nosed producer than an easy-going director. His demands that Betty and Victor (and, by implication, Chabrol) stop enjoying themselves and get on with the business of making a commercial thriller, complete with dead bodies and violence, link him to the mobsters in John Cassavetes’ *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976). It is these gangsters who police the line between creativity and the requirements of those financial institutions which put up the money for movies (“This is my house, in a way,” insists Monsieur K), and expect their investment to generate a profit. In this Monsieur K is a darker version of Victor, who justifies his criminal activities by reference to standard capitalist practice (“It’s like taxation”). Once again, some half-heard dialogue furnishes a statement of intentions. During Betty, Victor, and Maurice’s flight to Guadeloupe, one of their fellow passengers (Greg Germain) delivers the following monologue: “If you follow a story and how the press present it, you realize in the end that someone has made money from it. At that point, the story dies... It’s all just hoodwinking. Half-truths, false trails, decoys, sleight of hand.” Storytelling, far from being a morally pure activity, is here imbricated with confidence tricks and financial concerns, and it can hardly be coincidental that this speech is juxtaposed with Monsieur K’s first prominent appearance.

In his introduction to Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*, Jonathan Culler notes how “irony results from readers’ perceptions of discrepancies between poems: it is not so much that a speaker is being ironic as that the formulations of one poem undercut or ironically frame those of another.”⁷ Such a claim suggests the logic of *The Butcher*, rooted in the details of an authentic community, being immediately followed by *The Breach*, set at an unspecified time (Chabrol saw the film as predicting a hypothetical



future) and in an unidentified place. Though, another irony, *The Butcher's* fidelity to the specifics of its location, notably the ancient caves, enables it to portray man's bestiality as immutable, traceable to primitive drives reaching back millennia. In this world of mirrors and doubles, everything must eventually confront its reflection in a *mise en abyme*, an infinite process of repetition and reversal. Perhaps murderers, particularly those of *The Butcher* and *Good Time Girls* (*Les Bonnes Femmes*, 1960), will prove to be the real innocents, just as "serious" dramas will stand revealed as the real comedies (and vice versa). Recalling one of his ostensibly more solemn features, Chabrol argued that "There's not a second of humor in *Line of Demarcation* [*La Ligne De Démarcation*, 1966], and at the same time there's not a second which is *not* a second of humor, because it is a film which is entirely serious and totally stupid."⁸ By this standard, we might describe *Rien Ne Va Plus* as a film that is entirely stupid and totally serious. With each viewing, one becomes more aware of how many secrets this "entertainment" has, how much it is hiding. Every glance exchanged between Betty and Victor is susceptible to multiple interpretations, pointing towards not just those ambiguities the trickster's life dictates, but also sexual/familial ties which can be neither confirmed nor denied (for a denial would establish the thing denied as conceivable), and spectatorial responsibilities far beyond those we would normally expect to acknowledge while watching a caper movie. Reunited with Betty in the final scene, Victor looks directly into the camera, his expression suggesting both confusion and accusation, as if challenging us to accept joint responsibility – that Hitchcockian exchange of guilt Chabrol and Rohmer were the first to identify – for crimes which remain unspecified (but may be endemic to the cinematic medium). The viewer is left with the task of solving this enigma, and the solution we settle upon will inevitably reveal our own complicity, our own reflection.

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Footnotes

¹“Chabrol Talks to Rui Nogueira and Nicoletta Zalaffi,” *Sight & Sound*, Winter 1970/1971, p.6.

²Discussing François Truffaut’s book of interviews with Hitchcock, Chabrol observes that “In regards to the craft of directing, it’s great. But when it comes to his inner secrets, he’s completely silent. He is like a big shell that closes itself... He dodges everything.” These comments can be found in Robert Fischer’s documentary *Kino der zeichen (A Cinema of Signs, 2006)*, which consists primarily of an interview with Chabrol conducted in 1999. It is included on Kino Lorber’s Blu-ray of *Under Capricorn*.

³When announced by a croupier in the course of a roulette game, the phrase means “no more bets.” Significantly, the voice of the croupier who says this during *The Swindle*’s opening scene is provided by Chabrol himself.

⁴“Flaubert, c’est moi” by Ronald Bergan, *The Guardian*, May 6 1993.

⁵It bears a particularly close resemblance to *L’Homme qui vendit la Tour Eiffel*, Chabrol’s contribution to the 1964 anthology *The World’s Most Beautiful Swindles (Les Plus Belles Escroqueries Du Monde)*, in which some con artists attempt to convince their hapless victim that he has purchased the Eiffel Tower. There are also echoes of the much deadlier confidence games played by the eponymous protagonist of *Landru* (1963), who, like *The Swindle*’s Victor, pretends to be a retired military man.

⁶Compare the similarly vague sleeping arrangements in Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), another film which rigorously obfuscates the sexuality of its central characters.

⁷Introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition, 1993, p. xxxi.

⁸*Sight & Sound*, Winter 1970/1971, p.5.






Revive, Revive, Revive: Trauma, Politics and *The Color of Lies*

by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

In the mid-1980s, Paris was rocked by a series of terrorist attacks by a group identifying as the CSPPA (the Committee for Solidarity with Arab and Middle Eastern Political Prisoners). These attacks ran from early December 1985, with the bulk occurring in 1986, concluding with a last attack on September 17th. The CSPPA were a collective of activists of various political affiliations from Palestine, Armenia, and Lebanon, later suggested to be primarily funded by Hezbollah. The CSPPA's mission was the release of three terrorists, they claimed responsibility for 13 separate bombing attacks, were responsible for 20 deaths, and 255 injuries.



It's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment, but in the France of Claude Chabrol's fictional world of *The Color of Lies* (*Au Coeur Du Mensonge*, 1999), the protagonist is one of those injured in these attacks, artist René (Jacques Gamblin), who fell in love and married his medic wife Vivianne (Sandrine Bonnaire) when she cared for him after he was hurt. The film doesn't go into details about the attacks – in fact, they are mentioned in an almost casual, off-the-cuff manner. But their centrality to René's injuries (whose enduring legacy manifests in his signature limp) both significantly marks his personality and distinguishes him from Vivianne's lover, rock star journalist Germain-Roland Desmot (Antoine de Caunes). It is this that, in many ways, lies at the heart of *The Color of Lies*.

The movie's interpersonal dynamics are somewhat ambivalently framed around a mystery; who raped and murdered 10-year-old Eloise, one



of René's young art students? The police – led by newcomer Inspector Frédérique Lesage (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi) – believe René himself was the last person to see Eloise alive during her lesson at the small seaside home that he shares with Vivianne, and so begin to scrutinize his every move and possible motive, attracting the broader attentions of the small Brittany coastal town, which turns on him with suspicion.

The only distraction from the horrendous crime, it seems, is the annual return of Desmot to his opulent home in the area, who spends his holiday living across the bay from René and Vivianne. A novelist, television journalist, and all-round provocateur, his face is familiar across France, and the townsfolk enjoy having so big a name amongst their own, no matter how briefly as he takes his regular break from the hustle and bustle of the city to spend time in the village. Charismatic, wealthy, and unapologetically smug, it is seemingly easy work for Desmot to seduce Vivianne (although much more difficult, it is revealed when they finally have an opportunity to be intimate, their sexual encounter fizzling out almost immediately upon his somewhat lackluster performance).



Vivianne loves her husband, but they are in a rut, the evidence of which she sees in his increasingly frustrated relationship to his art practice. Having long given up doing the kind of portraiture work she so admired when they first met, for René teaching children – while satisfying – is a form of surrender, and an unspoken acknowledgement that his grand professional ambitions have been replaced by something that sees him now much closer to a self-funded hobbyist. Depressed only further after Eloise's murder and with his paranoia growing, Vivianne is easily lured by the razzle-dazzle of the notorious womanizer Desmot, she welcomes his advances with an almost calm, slightly amused sense of inevitability.

In their ostensible guise as rural police procedurals, it makes sense perhaps that parallels have been made between *The Color of Lies* and

Chabrol's earlier Jean Poirot vehicles, *Cop au Vin* (*Poulet au Vinaigre*, 1985) and its sequel, *Inspecteur Lavardin* (1986) which, for Philip French from *The Guardian*, share with *The Color of Lies* the fact they are all "a lively affair" where "an acerbic homicide cop [is] at work in a couple of singularly unpleasant provincial towns." But in many ways, *The Color of Lies* hearkens back to a much earlier Chabrol film, also; 1970's *The Butcher* (*Le Boucher*), surely one of the ultimate highlights from the hardworking filmmaker's prolific, decades-long career. Starring Jean Yanne as Popaul, the eponymous butcher, he falls in love with celibate schoolteacher H el ene (St ephane Audran). Despite their clear affection for each other and enjoyment of each other's company, she insists they remain friends only, which he respectfully accepts. Despite her denial that she is a lesbian, that she has a print of the iconic queer painting *Gabrielle d'Estr ees*



et une de ses sœurs (c. 1594) pinned to her bedroom wall perhaps implies otherwise. And so – between his sexual repression, broken heart, and deep psychological damage due to paralyzing war trauma – the butcher expresses his frustrations on his innocent victims through a series of shocking, violent crimes.

Like *The Color of Lies*, *The Butcher* too concerns rape and murder, but as the very title of the film suggests, the identity of the perpetrator is hardly a breathtaking twist. A recently returned soldier suffering from what we would now comfortably describe as severe war-related post-traumatic stress disorder, Popaul's crimes are quite clearly framed in the film as an almost natural response to the horrors he participated in and witnessed during his military service, as much as they are an expression of sexual repression regarding his friendship with Hélène – a relationship that both of them know will never become anything more than platonic.

Unlike *The Butcher* which never specifies which war – or wars – Popaul fought in, in *The Color of Lies*, the national trauma that so radically changed René's life is made slightly more explicit. While René of course is ultimately found innocent of Eloise's murder (the film seems almost indifferent to the revelation of who the actual culprit is; a creepy old local pedophile who menaced young girls in Indonesia before returning to France with his wife to set up a dubious trade in Indonesian antiques), René himself is hardly innocent. As the film's final twist reveals, it is René who was guilty of murdering Desmot himself when he returned the famous celebrity to his home across the bay after a particularly unpleasant dinner party with René and Vivianne.

Chabrol is rarely if ever considered a capital-P “Political” filmmaker when compared to some of his other French New Wave counterparts. But even in films such as these, when we scratch beneath the surface, the inescapable role of politics in the lives of people who are seemingly





untouched by the grander sways of political movements is revealed. Politics, in both *The Butcher* and *The Color of Lies*, has a decidedly far reach – it seeps into the lives of people who otherwise consciously shun it, sometimes years, sometimes even decades after significant events like wars or terrorist attacks.

And it is *precisely* this framework – much more than the somewhat ambivalently executed love triangle with Vivianne – that most concretely pits René and Desmond against each other. The former, a one-time ambitious artist with dreams of creative greatness, knows through hard-learned first-hand experience that the luxury of being excluded from the reality of politics is a privilege afforded perhaps to others, but not to him through his status as a survivor of a notorious terrorist attack almost 15 years earlier that forever changed his life. These results are both for better in the shape of Vivianne, and for worse, in terms of his physical injury and the emotional scars from the trauma that so clearly remain.

But with his expensive cigars, whiskey, and designer furniture as well as his lavish lifestyle defined by his unrestrained indulgence in sexual affairs with beautiful women, Desmond is both guilt and responsibility free. He is a deadbeat dad who calls his girlfriends “hussies,” but even worse is the audacity with which he pedals his professional bothsidesism approach to politics to simply boost his popularity in the media and garner more public attention. Writing for both extreme right- and left-wing publications, he makes no stand of his own. “If it doesn’t bother the editors, why should it bother me?”, he explains in an attempted defense of his political indifference. Self-aggrandizing in a typically bombastic manner, he declares at one point “I am like the world itself: explosive, combustible, submersible.”


But for all of his bravado, Desmond is as politically impotent as he is sexually: he is all words, with no substance. He is a man who is, ultimately, punished for bragging about being apolitical in a world that by its very

nature is fundamentally political, even for those – like Popaul in *The Butcher* and René here – who would have very happily have lived their lives with the bloodstained hand of geopolitical trauma never having touched them. “It’s over!” declares Vivianne happily upon the arrest of Eloise’s murderer at the end of the film, but if she has forgotten that Desmot’s killer has yet to be captured, René has not, for the simple reason that *he* is the murderer. “I’m afraid nothing is over, my love”, René replies calmly.

If *The Color of Lies* keeps the fallout from Eloise’s murder at arm’s length (*The Butcher* too keeps a similar distance from the harsh brutality of the rapes and murders around which its story at least superficially pivots), then it is arguably even more indifferent to Desmot’s murder. While the police investigate René’s friend Regis (Pierre Martot) for Desmot’s murder – a shady local character who sells stolen VCRs out of the back of his van and dabbles in stolen antiquities – and despite all evidence pointing in his direction, René insists calmly to his friend that he is assured of his innocence, simply because he knows (as he confesses to Vivianne) that he was responsible for the murder himself.

In the film’s final moments, as René quietly smokes on the beach, Vivianne approaches him and is initially met with a cold, detached response. But suddenly, he snaps: “it was me!”, he confesses to her in confidence. A flashback sequence reveals the details of the crime, where ultimately René’s motive was little more than just to shut Desmot up permanently, once and for all, silencing the man of so many words who ultimately stood for nothing. “I’m not gifted for crime,” he admits to his wife, the latter of whom supports him wholeheartedly. Disillusioned with who he has become, René tells her in words that again echo *The Butcher*; “You don’t know who I am. I lied to you.”

But Vivianne, the nurse and carer who ambivalently strayed but always knew where she belonged, is as always calmly accepting. “Revive, revive,



revive, René” she tells him, breathing words of encouragement as she emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually resuscitates the man whose exposure to violence almost destroyed him so many years earlier in that notorious real-life terrorist attack. And yet – with her help – he survived. Haunted by the inescapable presence of death and violence, for René even art itself is a dead field; he struggles to exhibit, there is little interest in his work and even he himself fails to maintain his passion for the creative arts.

Through Vivianne’s simple words, however, he – and we – are reminded of a simple but important fact; René has survived before, and he will survive again. While the end of the film at first may seem morally ambivalent, there is in the broader context of René’s journey a distinct kind of justice. That it is Desmot who is murdered – a man who typifies the grotesque populism of people who treat politics as a child’s toy they can manipulate and wield any way they please in pursuit of their own shallow ambition – seems less a crime in terms of the film’s own logic than it does a restoration of a kind of ethical equilibrium. Actions have consequences, acts of political violence have victims, and real lives are changed – forever and often irreversibly – when the scars of those actions fail to fully heal.

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Nightcap (Merci Pour Le Chocolat): The Poison of Perversity


by Pamela Hutchinson

There are some pairings that can't be improved upon, like smoked salmon and blintzes, or chocolate and hot milk. Isabelle Huppert and Claude Chabrol are another. The actress and director made a total of seven films together, before the latter's death in 2010. In 1978, Huppert won the first of her two Cannes Best Actress awards, for their first collaboration *Violette Nozière*, playing the title role of a young woman who poisons her parents. An apt subject perhaps for a director who studied pharmacology and law as an undergraduate; and a suitable role for an actress who has always been able to conjure an unsettlingly cool sadism. In 2000 they worked together for the second-to-last time, on *Nightcap (Merci Pour Le Chocolat)*, another tale of a female poisoner, and another film that twists the bonds between parents and children, husbands and wives, beyond their breaking point. In this film, the perversity is the point.


The film opens with a closeup of Huppert's enigmatic, mask-like face. Her character Mika is in the midst of making her wedding vows, but this bride is unlikely to give herself away with a blush. Until the film's harrowing emotional climax, Mika will prove to be a meticulous, reserved woman, who takes every care to remain behind that mask. As an actress, Huppert reveals everything about Mika by the way that she hides her emotions, with a series of small ambiguous gestures – pulling at the beads of her necklace, resting one hand in the small of her back – that say little in themselves, but nevertheless signal that there is something at work beneath that studied poise and practiced smile. Chabrol's camera



moves are just as tightly controlled, almost as inconspicuous, leading us through Mika's family home, lingering by some characters while others loiter in the back of the field. Huppert once told an interviewer that in her opinion, "The greatest books and films are those that mix distance and emotion." Her Mika remains elusive for much of the film, but no less fascinating for that. Charming to guests, but ruthless at the boardroom table, and prone to "accidents" of dangerous spilled liquids (Rohypnol-laced cocoa, scalding hot water) that seem anything but spontaneous, Mika fits neatly into the mold of what Ginette Vincendeau has called Huppert's "cerebral-perverse core established in *Violette Nozière*."



As the wedding celebrant cannot help but point out, Mika is entering into a strange marriage, the union of two people who are already divorced. Mika's groom André is also her ex-husband, which is a fitting familial paradox for a woman who tells that same celebrant "I am no one's daughter." She merely means that she was adopted, and so the family business she has inherited has passed down to her, but not through a blood connection. Further, she flat-out refuses to associate the company's brand with children, even though their business is sweet chocolate made with wholesome milk. (Notice how many times Mika drinks or requests water – pointedly thinner than both blood and chocolate.) Instead of children's charities, the firm's philanthropy takes the form of sponsoring pain clinics instead. Later a throwaway suggestion to fund another kind of clinic makes sense only if we suspect the worst about Mika. "What research could Muller Chocolate want from a crime lab?" Even Mika's stepson Guillaume, the fruit of her husband's second marriage, says it is impossible for him to think of Mika as his "belle-mère."



The perversity multiplies. The spring that launches the plot into action is the revelation that two babies in a maternity clinic were briefly switched before being returned to their natural parents. Those babies are now 18 years old: one is Guillaume and the other is Jeanne, the daughter of a



forensic scientist. Again, ambiguity remains as to whether the babies and parents match, as no DNA tests were ever undertaken. The evidence of our own eyes and ears defeats logic: Guillaume has not inherited an ounce of his virtuoso father André's musical talent, while Jeanne is a very promising pianist, whom André is delighted to mentor. Jeanne and Guillaume are both missing one parent, a father and mother respectively, and Jeanne begins to mimic Lisbeth, Guillaume's mother. There are crossed threads elsewhere: Jeanne's boyfriend Axel has the scientific bent she lacks, and is a trainee at her own mother's clinic. In time Jeanne will discover that, in keeping with a theme already established, her father is not her father – her mother's husband was infertile so they used a sperm donor. And talking of marital relations, Mika and André can't have sex, because he is hooked on the sleeping pills that she feeds him every night. In the role of André, musician Jacques Dutronc's naturally gloomy features are apt for a man sleepwalking through life, married to a possible villain. His dark hair, height, and high cheekbones find an echo in the physiques of Anna Mouglalis and Rodolphe Pouly who play Jeanne and Guillaume, leaving Huppert's petite, redheaded Mika as a blatant cuckoo in the nest. Jeanne is perfectly at home in their house and her own. When she rests her head on her mother's (Brigitte Catillon) shoulder, it creates a perfect image of twinned faces, assuring us that their bond is strong.

There's an abundance of plot detail there already, and that's without the film's central intrigue: Jeanne's growing suspicion that Mika may be intent on murdering Guillaume, as she may also years ago have murdered his mother. And yet *Nightcap* is considerably sleeker in narrative than the novel it was based on, *The Chocolate Cobweb* (1948) by Charlotte Armstrong. Although the film differs substantially from the novel, Chabrol manifests that awkward title in what scholar Jacob Leigh calls "the film's primary asserted symbol," a metaphor of almost comical obviousness. Mika, whose equivalent character in the novel placidly knits almost constantly as a cover for her nefarious plotting, knits a large brown sofa-throw in

the shape of a spiderweb. The chocolate heiress who is simultaneously the spider-woman of film noir is first shown drawing threads into this oversized web on Jeanne's initial visit to her home. By the end of the film she will curl into a fetal position beside it: drawn into her own trap.

It was the second time that Chabrol had adapted an Armstrong novel, following 1970's *The Breach* (*La Rupture*), based on *The Balloon Man* (1969). With his child psychiatrist co-screenwriter, Caroline Eliacheff, Chabrol transferred the location from California to Lausanne, turning a novel of intrigue into a film that carries another set of implications about still waters running deep, underlined by a lingering shot of sparkling Lake Geneva, and a color palette dominated by tones of white and pastel shades. Specifically, and typically of a Chabrol film, we are encouraged to believe that beneath the surface of haute-bourgeois society in a neutral, conservative nation we may find jealousy, resentment, and unnatural desires. Not just murder but incest: Mika suggests Guillaume and Jeanne, siblings by suggestion, should become lovers.

Chabrol's familial critique of this Swiss upper-crust milieu seems a little personal. His own films are something of a family affair. As with many of Chabrol's later works, the composer for *Nightcap* was his son Matthieu Chabrol, the first assistant director was his stepdaughter Cécile Maistre, and her mother, his wife Aurore, was the script supervisor. Famously, his sets were relaxed and convivial spaces with cast and crew coming together to share delicious meals, cooked by the director himself. A far cry from the Polonskis of Lausanne. The strategy of this film is to use these fractured families as a symbol of a wider societal malaise. It is not so much the biological facts of the interrupted bond that preoccupy Chabrol, but the singularity and solipsism of his characters: Guillaume plays with his Gameboy while André practices piano in the adjoining room. For Chabrol, the intention was to illustrate the perversity of this solipsism via "the slow dissolution of the most definite certainties of our society – here,



filial descent, and so the family. The main aim is to get across the idea that all certainties melt away as the story progresses.”

In his own words, Chabrol was “in favor of simple plots and complicated characters.” That is precisely the case here. The screenplay smooths out many of the wrinkles in the novel’s murder-mystery plot and gives us a much more compelling antagonist in the form of Mika: a villain who will ultimately become a tragic figure. André becomes a pianist rather than a painter, and his late second wife is no longer his winsome muse but a photographer with a compelling gaze of her own. A posthumous exhibition of her work in a local gallery displays self-portraits and anatomical closeups. One image of fingers squeezing around a throat, and another of fingers resting either side of a nipple, as if in preparation for breastfeeding, illustrate both the threat of murder that slices through the film, and the focus on parenting, and milk as a symbol of the natural inter-generational bond, that rests on its surface.

Such conspicuous symbols, as with the oversized spiderweb on the living room sofa, create a distancing effect that is almost camp. These traces of pulp fiction lend weight to Jeanne’s suspicions about Mika, which is to say that they assure the audience that we are firmly in the territory of the thriller rather than the family melodrama. So there must be a murderer, and a victim, even if they turn out to be the same person.

No doubt, this is a cinematically self-conscious film. The revelation about the mislaid babies only comes about because Jeanne and Axel are looking up the cinema listings in the newspaper, and Jeanne immediately makes a movie reference, to 1988’s *Life is a Long Quiet River* (*La vie est un long fleuve tranquille*), a social comedy using the prince-and-the-pauper gimmick, in which infants from wildly different social classes are swapped at birth. There are two more film references that are impossible to miss. When Guillaume is laid up with the ankle injury that she inflicted, Mika’s

stepmotherly devotion takes the form of lending him two VHS tapes of classic films: Jean Renoir's *Night at the Crossroads* (*La Nuit du carrefour*, 1932) and Fritz Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947). In the first film, a twice-married woman doses drinks with sleeping pills, and there's a hair-raising scene of dangerous night-time driving. In the latter, an obsessively controlling woman marries a man whose previous wife died in mysterious circumstances. It is a confession by videotape.

There is another cinematic hint lurking in Jeanne and Guillaume's maternity clinic mixup. As the instigating factor that leads Jeanne to André and Mika's doorstep, a mystery that is promptly dropped, this is a classic MacGuffin, the signature plot device of Alfred Hitchcock. Chabrol's passion for, and debt to, Hitchcock, needs no rehearsal at this point. But the British director's shadow is cast across the many grim ironies that pepper this film, a film that turns itself inside out, reveals what it claims to be hiding. André calls Mika "the devil incarnate" moments after he has married her, and Jeanne giggles as she jokes about her boyfriend drugging and raping her (he too keenly adopts the role of a potential attacker when explaining the uses of Rohypnol). Most disturbingly of all, Mika weeps when she discovers her stepson is alive.

The piece of music that André has been teaching Jeanne is Liszt's *Funérailles*, which he instructs her to play as if it is anything but a funeral march. It's this that fills the air at the film's climax in the final perversity, as André plays a funereal tune for the children who have been saved from death, from the consequences of a mixup (coffee for chocolate) as simple as the one that marked their first day on earth. This is the tune that crescendos as Mika realizes just what she has done, and what she has confessed to. The realization that she is a murderer whose only victim is herself comes as she listens to a funeral march for the living. The ironies of her life have exploded. And the truth about being no one's daughter, an ambivalent stepmother and a divorced wife is that it leaves a person all alone. As she retreats into her own web she understands: "I am nothing."

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In a Gilded Cage: *The Flower of Evil* and Chabrol's Cinema of Entrapment

by Catherine Dousteysier-Khoze

Incest is the dark secret that is often to be found at the heart of Chabrol's cinema, openly so in *Le Beau Serge* (1958), *Violette Nozière* (1977), *Blood Relatives* (*Les Liens De Sang*, 1978), and in more elliptical form throughout his filmography. However, it is never more central than in *The Flower of Evil* (*La Fleur Du Mal*, 2003) where it works both as the main theme and the plot device. The title itself, besides the passing nod to Baudelaire, functions as an allegory for incest.

The film, adapted from a script written by Caroline Eliacheff and Louise L. Lambrichs (and very loosely based, as for *A Girl Cut in Two* [*La Fille Coupée en Deux*, 2007], on a real-life event that took place more than a century before in the US) is a psychological thriller with elements of political and family drama, which centers on the members of the very bourgeois Charpin-Vasseur dynasty. Given Chabrol's liking for puns of all sorts – the slaughtered family in *La Cérémonie* (1995) was called Lelièvre or “hare” in French – one cannot help thinking that the phonetic proximity of “Charpin-Vasseur” with the “lapin-chasseur” dish, that is, “rabbit hunter-style,” is no coincidence. We are being treated to yet another corrosive and playful study of a dysfunctional bourgeois family.

The film starts when the prodigal son, François (Benoît Magimel), comes back home after a few years in America where he had escaped partly

in order to distance himself from a father whom he dislikes profoundly, partly in order not to fall in love with his attractive stepsister, Michèle (Mélanie Doutey). His ambitious stepmother Anne Charpin-Vasseur (Nathalie Baye) is pursuing a career in local politics, to the dismay of her husband, serial womanizer Gérard Vasseur (Bernard Le Coq), while the bourgeois household is held together by the apparently benign old aunt, Aunt Line (Suzanne Flon), who looks keenly on the budding romance between stepbrother and stepsister François and Michèle.

There are three types of interconnected family secrets in *The Flower of Evil*: collaboration, incest, and murder. First, an anonymous letter, reminiscent of Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943), and perhaps written by Gérard Vasseur himself, as he resents his wife's political ambitions, is sent to Anne Charpin-Vasseur in order to smear her political campaign. The letter makes it clear that the family is hiding a dark story of collaboration with the Nazis: Aunt Line's father was a vile collaborator who betrayed his own son, a member of the Resistance, to the Nazis before being killed himself in mysterious circumstances – or rather (spoiler alert!) by his own daughter Line, as the viewer is to discover. Second, the anonymous letter reveals that the family is completely inbred, with members of the Charpin and the Vasseur families intermarrying for generations. As the film moves along, it slowly becomes clear that Michèle and François may even be real brother and sister, in an echo of the incestuous relationship that Aunt Line had with her own brother, also called François. Third, just as Aunt Line murdered her own father to avenge her brother's/lover's death, Michèle ends up killing her stepfather when he drunkenly assaults her. The circular construction of the film seems to imply that there is no escape and that everything harks back to that original “sin.”

The apparent allusion to Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) in the title turns out to be something of a red herring: the significant 19th-century reference in *La Fleur Du Mal* is more likely to be to Zola and his *Rougon-*

Macquart (1871–1893) series. Like Zola, albeit in a much more condensed manner, Chabrol delights in investigating the influence of heredity and milieu, and in studying the family “flaws” of a few generations of Charpin-Vasseurs, from World War II to the turn of the 21st century. Whereas Adelaide Fouque, known as Aunt Dide, is the common ancestor for both the Rougon and the Macquart families in Zola’s famous “natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire,” Aunt Line is the knot of the Charpin-Vasseurs. She is the one who brings in incest and murder as the original sin (although they are hardly described as such in the film) and is therefore responsible for the subsequent curse weighing on the family (just like Aunt Dide’s madness affects the whole Rougon-Macquart descendance). But Chabrol’s perversity, and this is no small feat, lies both in making the viewer identify and sympathize with characters who are incestuous killers (Aunt Line and Michèle), and in normalizing incestuous relationships.

A kind, mild-mannered, benevolent figure, albeit an incestuous murderess, Aunt Line epitomizes the oxymoronic “flower of evil” of the title. As the quintessential harmless little old lady who has no qualms in committing murder, Aunt Line’s character may owe to farcical black comedy such as Joseph Kesserling’s 1939 stage play *Arsenic and Old Lace* (and its film adaptation from Frank Capra from 1944). But Aunt Line also functions as an ambivalent character in a perverted fairy-tale: she is Michèle and François’ “fairy godmother” who protects them and gives them the key to her “magic house” or house of incest (the Pyla house) in which they can safely consummate their relationship away from the bourgeois house and the jealous gaze of the patriarch. Without quite breaking the realistic framework by venturing into fantasy, Chabrol nevertheless shows through the *mise en scène* that Aunt Line is endowed with a witch’s special powers. Indeed, just before Michèle kills her own stepfather, Aunt Line is seen gazing at the moon in a state of trance. The moon has triggered recollections of the night when she killed her father

and this episode functions as a prolepsis for the event that is about to unfold, namely, Michèle's killing of Gérard Vasseur. The montage seems to imply that Aunt Line wanted Gérard to die: she is the one who makes it happen through her double, Michèle. In this way she gets a chance to redeem herself by saving the young Michèle.

Chabrol's avowed fondness for symmetry and doubles (as in *The Butcher* [*Le Boucher*, 1970], for instance) shows here through the Micheline (aka Aunt Line)/Michèle relationship. The similar names are an indication that the two women are conceived as doubles or reflections of each other. One remarkable shot, which as a visual metaphor of entrapment encapsulates



the whole film, emphasizes the special link between Aunt Line and Michèle: both women, sitting in the living room of the bourgeois house, are filmed through a birdcage, as if they were inside it.

This playful image functions as a clear indictment of the stifling bourgeois environment. Chabrol hints that the two women are locked together in the cage of heredity, the bourgeois family and, above all, patriarchy. The viewer is forewarned that their destiny or battle will be intertwined: both are or were in love with their brothers and both need to kill the father figure who is an obstacle to that love. The only way out of the cage is to kill the patriarch. Once again in a Chabrol film, the bad father or stepfather is in the line of fire (see also *This Man Must Die* [*Que La Bête Meure*, 1969]; *Inspecteur Lavardin* [1986]; *The Color of Lies* [*Au Cœur Du Mensonge*, 1999]; and so on). Chabrol uses the vertical bars of the main staircase to similar menacing effect (in *The Flower of Evil*, but also in *Violette Nozière* or *La Cérémonie*). For Isabelle Huppert, Chabrol's cinema as a whole is about filming forms of entrapment ("il filme toujours un enfermement").¹

Such a striking expressionistic, "Langian" shot (Fritz Lang was indeed, together with Hitchcock and Renoir, a key influence on Chabrol's cinema), without quite giving here the film the fantastic or Gothic dimension that will characterize the following Chabrol (*The Bridesmaid* [*La Demoiselle D'Honneur*, 2004]), encourages at least a deeply symbolical reading. In this symmetrical, carefully constructed shot of the caged women, everything has its place and meaning. Chabrol has complete mastery of what is inside the frame. Just like Jean Vigo before him, he is what critic Alain Bergala calls a "cinéaste du plan," i.e. a director obsessed with the inner composition of each shot: "someone whose pleasure, when making films, is first and foremost to make shots, one after the other, without sacrificing too much of this inalienable desire to the film's superego as future totality."² And as Bergala pointed out, the watchword of the *Nouvelle Vague* was "one idea per shot!"³ Fritz Lang's enduring influence

on Chabrol can be traced through this type of uncanny, expressionistic shot, which lends a painting-like quality to some of his images. Nothing is ever left to chance. The shot is to be scanned for clues as to the nature or fate of the characters.

There is also some kind of uncanniness or muted magic realism at stake in *The Flower of Evil* through Chabrol's treatment of time and space. History keeps repeating itself: as Aunt Line says "Time does not exist, it is a perpetual present" and both the Pyla house and the Bordeaux house allow for time warps. In particular, one recurrent zooming shot of the narrow lane leading from the Pyla house to the beach attracts the viewer's attention. This subjective shot, characterized by a great depth of focus, is filled with a canopy of trees that frames a view of the sea and the beach. This internal framing device emphasizes the metaphorical dimension of the shot that, quite literally, through the slow zooming effect, allows Aunt Line to travel down memory lane. Indeed, this "corridor" functions as a catalyst or a conduit for her memories of the past. The zooming-in allows to travel forward in space and backward in time; it serves to encapsulate the duality of past and present and the transition is seamless, invisible. Chabrol was very keen on this and claimed that "Time only exists in the present."⁴

For Chabrol, this very "Kantian" notion of time is at the heart of the film, although *The Flower of Evil* also seems to enact some version of Nietzsche's eternal return. This is indeed reflected through a shot in the opening sequence (devoted to the first murder scene, when Aunt Line killed her father) that is then duplicated, with small differences, at the end: Aunt Line and Michèle are sitting on the floor in their bedroom, in the same position, next to the window. And the two bodies of the murdered patriarchs are lying on the floor, arranged in a very similar fashion. Time and place seem to have merged, and Aunt Line and Michèle are one. The main difference, however, as Aunt Line points out herself is

that Michèle has got her own lover/brother François to help her through the crisis (and, indeed, Michèle and François are shown joining together the party celebrating the election of Michèle's mother as town mayor). Such a tricky, spiral-like structure echoes other Chabrol films such as *Torment* (*L'Enfer*, 1994) or his more experimental New Wave film *Web of Passion* (*À Double Tour*, 1959), which also focuses on the disintegration of a bourgeois family.

Both the ambivalent handling of the space-time relationship and the choice of incest as its main theme ultimately encourage a mythical interpretation of *The Flower of Evil*. While some of Chabrol's films openly engage with "myths" – *This Man Must Die*, *Ten Days Wonder* (*La Décade Prodigieuse*, 1971), or *The Breach* (*La Rupture*, 1970), with its epigraph from Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677) – many others do so in a more subtle way. Chabrol, like Balzac, keeps turning contemporary matter into myths. The director said himself during the making of *The Bridesmaid*: "One needs some kind of anchor into reality in order to be able to go beyond it."⁵ Without sacrificing the realist framework inherent in his representation of the society of his time, Chabrol had a keen interest in depicting universal situations and characters. Just like Balzac was exploring passions, ambitions and ideas, Chabrol proceeded to dissect jealousy (*Torment*), revenge (*This Man Must Die*), madness/the monster (*The Hatter's Ghost* [*Les Fantômes du Chapelier*, 1982]; *The Bridesmaid*); unfaithfulness (*The Unfaithful Wife* [*La Femme Infidèle*, 1969]); and power (*Comedy of Power* [*L'Ivresse du Pouvoir*, 2006]). *The Flower of Evil* is Chabrol's modern myth about incest or, in his own words, "a joyful Greek tragedy."

In *The Flower of Evil*, Chabrol manages to give a full facelift to murder and incest, which are recast respectively as self-defense and true love. The film also contains a strong feminist message: once the bad fathers/husbands are dead, women thrive. Ironically, *The Flower of Evil* has a double happy ending: women have scored victories both on the political and on

the family fronts. Gérard Vasseur is smoothly replaced by Anne Charpin-Vasseur's trusted helper (and would-be lover, as Chabrol hints on a few occasions), Matthieu Lartigue (Thomas Chabrol), who acts as *maître de maison* as if the former one had never existed. The "tâchons de faire bonne figure" ("Let's try to make a good impression") pronounced by François/Benoît Magimel is somewhat reminiscent of the ending of Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du jeu*, 1939), a film that Chabrol allegedly saw more than 80 times: the emphasis is on bourgeois appearances that must be protected at all costs. No-one even notices that Gérard Vasseur is missing: the bourgeoisie has self-regenerated, just as seamlessly as the nuclear family in Agnès Varda's wonderfully cynical cliché of family life, *Le Bonheur* (1965). And unlike the ruthless female killers played by Sandrine Bonnaire and Isabelle Huppert in *La Cérémonie*, or Isabelle Huppert in *Nightcap* (*Merci Pour Le Chocolat*, 2000), Aunt Line and Michèle are sympathetic. They killed despicable, controlling and abusive men so the viewer is likely to be on their side, insidiously drawn in and trapped into Chabrol's gilded cinematographic cage. *The Flower of Evil* is ultimately a subtle, slippery, and ever so toxic (fairy-)tale of female sisterhood and empowerment.⁶

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Footnotes

¹*La Fleur Du Mal*, DVD supplement.

²Alain Bergala, "Le plan-aquarium." in *L'Atalante. Un film de Jean Vigo*. Paris: Edition Cinémathèque Française, 2000), pp. 153-62 [p. 153].

³*Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴*La Fleur Du Mal*, DVD supplement.

⁵*La Demoiselle D'Honneur*, DVD supplement, "Un penchant pour le déséquilibre."

⁶I would like to thank Edinburgh University Press for giving me permission to re-use extracts from my book *Claude Chabrol's Aesthetics of Opacity* (EUP, 2018), pp. 105-109.







About the Transfers

The films in this collection were restored and supplied by MK2.

The Swindle (Rien Ne Va Plus) is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with original stereo audio.

The Color of Lies (Au Coeur Du Mensonge) is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with original stereo audio.

Nightcap (Merci Pour Le Chocolat) is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with original stereo and 5.1 audio.

The Flower of Evil (La Fleur Du Mal) is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with original stereo and 5.1 audio.