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## Elle

**Country:** France (2016) (130 mins)  
**Director:** Paul Verhoeven  
**Writers:** David Birke (novel by Philippe Djian)  
**Cinematography :** Stéphane Fontaine

**Cast:** Isabelle Huppert (Michèle Leblanc), Laurent Lafitte (Patrick), Anne Consigny (Anna), Charles Berling (Richard Leblanc), Virginie Efira (Rebecca), Judith Magre (Irène Leblanc), Christian Berkel (Robert), Jonas Bloquet (Vincent)

What do you get when you cross Isabelle Huppert with Paul Verhoeven? The answer is no joke – though it's often troublingly funny, with an anvil-heavy emphasis on troubling. Elle is Verhoeven's first movie in six years, Huppert's fourth in one, and a blistering ethical fire-walk for more or less anyone who dares watch it. Petit bourgeois propriety and progressive feminist empathy come in for an equal-opportunities roasting.

Based on the novel **Oh...**, by Philippe Djian, the French author of **Betty Blue**, the film begins with a scenario that's wholly sickening, but also an insta-plot cliché. A single woman, Michèle (Huppert), is raped in her home by a masked intruder. From that opening, however, the film corkscrews off in a hundred different directions, none of them expected. Individually, they're variously suspenseful, grotesque, heartbreaking, deviant, and comedic. Side by side, they're impossible to reconcile. That's the idea.

It might help to think of Elle as the **Starship Troopers** of the rape-revenge genre – because in much the same way Verhoeven's 1997 science-fiction satire sent up fascistic action movies with what initially looked like a gaudy celebration of them, it forces you to critically confront every myth and cliché about sexual violence it dredges up and subverts.

It's silkily, self-consciously chic, with a coffee-table colour palette of aubergine, olive and taupe. And the clothes are straightforwardly to die for: this must be the first film for which you could run a legitimate tie-in feature on how to get the rapist's look.

It's impossible to describe all of this without sounding callous, but again, that's the aim. Even the identity of Michèle's rapist isn't unveiled at the end with a Scooby-Doo flourish, but is allowed to sprout into a subplot in its own right. After seeing it twice, I'm not entirely convinced the film manages to stick the next-to-impossible landing it asks of itself. But it's undoubtedly a needling, ingenious challenge that wants to tie its audience in knots.

Take the aftermath of the attack, which is literally the first thing in the film we hear – and the second thing we see, after a reaction shot of Michèle's pet cat looking on impassively. Once the prowler flees, Michèle sweeps up the mess, bins her underwear, orders a takeaway and takes a bath – and as blood begins to bloom in the soap suds between her legs, she swishes it away, with something resembling impatience.



Is she a victim? Well, obviously. But everything she does is janglingly out of step with standard movie-victim behaviour... Selling the character at the eye of this particular storm would be a treacherous ask for any performer. But Huppert – a bona fide world cinema icon who was Oscar-nominated for this – takes it in her stride. It's a performance of loaded glances and flickering micro-reactions, all expressed with a cool emotional fluency that's as exhilarating to watch in the moment as it is bottomlessly impressive in retrospect.

For me, it would take something very hefty indeed to top her work in Claude Chabrol's **Story of Women**, or Michael Haneke's **The Piano Teacher** – but there's a strong case to be made for this being her most roundedly impressive performance to date.

Michèle has a good reason not to call the police, which are set out in a slowly revealed backstory – it involves her elderly father, who's currently in prison – that's so outlandish it challenges us to accept it with a straight face. She also has a love affair with a friend's husband to conduct.

Oh, and there's work to get on with too: namely, producing a fantasy video-game in which a prim medieval princess is attacked by a tentacled creature, and is transformed, via a quasi-orgasmic rapture, into a red-eyed, bondage-gear-clad temptress. Michèle knows this stuff sells, and even asks her male graphic artists to ramp up the depravity, while simultaneously wondering if one of them might be her attacker.

The office intrigue is one of many subplots that draw in an ensemble cast from around Michèle's life. There's her business partner Anna (Anne Consigny), her gigolo-courting mother (Judith Magre), the suave couple (Laurent Lafitte, Virginie Efira) who move into the house across the street, her crumpled ex-husband Richard (Charles Berling), their hapless grown-up son (Jonas Bloquet), and his shrewish, pregnant girlfriend (Alice Isaaz).

An extended sequence in which many of these characters come together for a Christmas Eve dinner at Michèle's house feels like stalling for time – until you twig this spring-loaded, Molièresque extended skirmish for status, and especially sexual status, is the film's smirking worldview in miniature.

This is the moment, for want of a better phrase, that all Elle breaks loose – and Huppert, smiling thinly in the centre, is the keystone.

Robbie Collin, *The Telegraph*

### Our previous presentation (end of last season):

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated **The Assassin**, screened on Tuesday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, **4.3** stars out of 5.

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Next Cramphorn "Picture House" Film, Monday 2nd October: **The Midwife** (12A), France, 2017, dir. Martin Provost

### Our next presentation:

**Monday 9th October: Julietta** (Spain, 2016, dir. Pedro Almodóvar) at 8pm.