

Huppert and Chabrol: Opacity, Dissonance, and the Crystal-Character

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Isabelle Huppert played the lead role in seven films by Claude Chabrol (more than with any other director at the time of writing), from her remarkable performance in *Violette Nozière* in 1977 to *L'Ivresse du pouvoir* in 2006. Together with Stéphane Audran and, to a lesser extent, Bernadette Lafont, Isabelle Huppert is widely regarded as one of Chabrol's "muses" or key actresses (Austin 1999, 5–6) and the two of them enjoyed a close collaboration until the director's death in September 2010, at a time when they were preparing the adaptation of a Simenon novel: *L'Escalier de fer/The Iron Staircase* (Delorme 2010, 23). Huppert was not confined to a single genre or type of role in Chabrol's films: she acted in (costume) dramas (*Madame Bovary* (1991), *Une Affaire de femmes/A Story of Women* [1988]); political dramas (*L'Ivresse du pouvoir/Comedy of Power* [2006]); thrillers (*Violette Nozière* (1978), *La Cérémonie* (1995), *Merci pour le chocolat* [2000]); comedies (*Rien ne va plus* [1997]). Moreover, Chabrol fully explored the versatility of her acting palette by sometimes going against typecast: he famously let her choose the role of the chatty postal clerk in *La Cérémonie*, leaving what seemed like the more "Huppertian" part of the cool, silent, inscrutable maid to Sandrine Bonnaire (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 69).

The heroines portrayed by Huppert in Chabrol's films share the following features to a greater or lesser degree: they all hide a great potential for anger and violence and try to escape from some form of oppression (be it social, family, or gender related). However, as Huppert has pointed out during an interview, more than the physical or psychological resemblances between the characters, it is the performances themselves that present similarities (Delorme 2010, 22).¹ And in another interview, published in 2012 by Michel Pascal for his book on Chabrol, Huppert identified a main thread running through the seven films:

“For him, I represented the idea of ordinary evil. (...) We opened Pandora’s box together” (Pascal 2012, 201).² It is this ability to represent the repressed violence of the ordinary monster, its ultimate unreadability or opacity, and the self-reflexive quality of the performances that this chapter will explore. In order to analyze what might be called Huppert’s art of dissonance in greater detail, and by drawing on Deleuze’s concept of the crystal-image (Deleuze 1985), I shall resort to the notion of “the crystal-character.” Although this varies in intensity, I will argue that Huppert’s performances are always self-reflexive: she injects a certain rigidity or “falseness” into her characters, which at times lends them an automaton-like quality. This self-reflexivity or second-degree acting introduces cracks into the diegetic fabric, which give psychological depth and ambivalence to Chabrol’s world(s) and encourage a reframing not only of the notion of evil but of representation itself. The inscrutability, incongruity, and (self)reflexivity, which define many of Huppert’s performances (this is especially true in *Violette Nozière*, *La Cérémonie* and *Merci pour le chocolat*), are pivotal in shaping the director’s fragmented, dark, and nuanced representation of women, and his own “aesthetics of opacity” (Dousteyssier-Khoze 2018). Finally, and in order to explore further the dynamics of this symbiotic bond between Huppert and Chabrol, the chapter will also focus on the odd-one out in the Huppert–Chabrol filmography: *Rien ne va plus*, a playful and somewhat bewildering faux caper story that can be construed as a mystifying *film à clef* or myth in the making on the pair’s partnership.

Huppert and Chabrol: A Symbiotic Collaboration

Huppert and Chabrol enjoyed a long, rare professional partnership that ran for more than thirty years and was interrupted in mid-sentence, so to say, by the director’s death. There are few comparable collaborations in the history of cinema between a male director and a female actor who is not the director’s wife or lover. Beyond the well-known director–“muse” couples of Dietrich–Sternberg, Chabrol–Audran, Godard–Karina, Bergman–Rossellini, or Antonioni–Vitti, to give but a few examples, it is somewhat difficult to find a match for the Huppert–Chabrol team. One may think, however, of gay/queer male-director long-standing collaborations with a favorite actress: Derek Jarman and Tilda Swinton; Todd Haynes and Julianne Moore;³ Pedro Almodóvar and Carmen Maura (although the relationship did not run smoothly), or Almodóvar and

Penélope Cruz who have developed a very close working bond over decades and a number of films (and still counting).

Chabrol did not “discover” Huppert of course. By the time she acted in *Violette Nozière* in 1977, she had already featured in close to twenty films, including some by Claude Sautet (*César et Rosalie/César and Rosalie*, 1972), Bertrand Blier (*Les Valseuses/Going Places*, 1974), Otto Preminger (*Rosebud*, 1975), and Bertrand Tavernier (*Le Juge et l'Assassin/The Judge and the Assassin*, 1976). *Les Valseuses*, which was a popular success (with a whiff of scandal) in France, brought her wide attention, although her first major breakthrough came when she took up the lead role in the adaptation of Pascal Lainé's novel *La Dentellière/The Lacemaker* (1977) by Claude Goretta, for which she won the BAFTA Award for “Most Promising Newcomer to Leading Film Roles” and in which she played the part of a young working-class woman, Pomme—the shy, pathologically withdrawn lace-maker of the title. However, Chabrol can be credited for being the first director to cast Huppert as a full-fledged anti-heroine. Indeed, *Violette Nozière*, which tells the true story of an eighteen-year-old *empoisonneuse* who tried to kill her parents in 1933 Paris, provided Huppert with her first role as an inscrutable killer. Chabrol later gave a somewhat casual account of this first collaboration that pointed to a strong mutual interest in working together at an early stage: “at the time, I was keen to work with Isabelle and I heard that, on her end, she wanted to get the part” (Jousse and Nevers 1994, 53).⁴ The film is widely regarded by critics as a passing of the baton from one of Chabrol's muses to the other: Audran (who significantly plays *Violette Nozière*'s mother) and Huppert. And both Audran and Huppert endorsed that interpretation with Huppert agreeing when it was put to her: “Yes, absolutely. All the more so as we were mother and daughter in the film” (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 69).⁵

Violette Nozière is also a crucial film for Chabrol at a time when his career was at one of its all-time lows. After the early Nouvelle Vague successes of *Le Beau Serge* (1958) and *Les Cousins/The Cousins* (1959) in the late 1950s, and his reinvention with the masterpieces of the “Hélène cycle” (Austin 1999, 42) in the late 1960s and early 1970s —featuring Audran as a main character, and ranging from *Les Biches* (1967) to *Juste avant la nuit/Just Before Nightfall* (1971) via *La Femme infidèle/The Unfaithful Wife* (1969) and *Le Boucher* (1969)—Chabrol was again going through a dry patch (or, more accurately, making a number of mostly uninspired films) in the 1970s. In this regard, the success of *Violette Nozière*, for which Huppert received the Best Actress

award at Cannes and Audran a César for Best Supporting Actress, was equally crucial for Chabrol as a seasoned director as for an up-and-coming actor such as Huppert.

By the time they were working again together on *Une affaire de femmes* (1988), ten years had elapsed, during which Huppert had worked with Godard, Pialat, Tavernier, and Blier, among others, and established herself as one of France's leading actors, albeit not yet the international star of the twenty-first century (her foray into Hollywood with the epic western *Heaven's Gate* in 1980 had been a resounding flop). Huppert had considerably matured as an actor and their relationship had moved to one of friends and equals (as in equally recognized and self-confident in their art), despite their twenty-three-year age difference.⁶ In 2000, Huppert documented in further detail the evolution of her relationship with Chabrol over the years:

In the beginning, I had the impression that we spoke to each other very little. There was a sort of status quo between him and me, a little as if he wanted to maintain a role as an observer. From film to film, perhaps because we know each other better and that gives him a kind of freedom, we say more things to each other [...] Working together in that way and over such a long time together, it's unique. In the life of an actor, we mainly work with a director once and for all. The contrary is rare. That creates a singular relationship, which is both very exciting and very reassuring, with the feeling that things never repeat themselves and that it's a story without an ending. It's therefore happiness. (*L'Express*, 01/05/2000)⁷

As was made clear in a number of interviews,⁸ the Huppert–Chabrol symbiotic partnership is the enviable and rare encounter of two highly compatible minds, two professionals with a mutual respect for each other, who clearly enjoyed collaborating. Both shared the same cultural mind-set (including a passion for literature) and a dry sense of humor. And when asked if she chooses a specific script or a Chabrol film, Huppert immediately replies: “un Chabrol.” “When he asks me to make a film with him, I make a film with him but generally it's the right script [la bonne histoire]” (*La Cérémonie* 1995, DVD extras). Indeed, Huppert fully subscribes to an *auteurist* approach to cinema; she has always admitted that the “essential rule” for her was following the orders of the director: “I tend to be guided. I don't mind at all being an instrument.”⁹ Huppert uses a striking metaphor of entrapment, that of the butterfly and the entomologist, to describe the complicated power dynamics between director and actor, during the making of *La Cérémonie*:

“When I make films with Chabrol, I feel like I am a butterfly caught in a net. And his camera is the net. The way in which he observes his characters” (La Cérémonie 1995, DVD extras).¹⁰ She then goes on to mention Chabrol’s entomologist’s eye.¹¹ Huppert’s somewhat masochistic approach to the mechanics of performance seems to imply that freedom as an actor can be achieved only via surrendering power to the director’s gaze. She enjoys letting go of control in the “safe” environment that the Chabrol set provides for her. In order to thrive, she needs some constraints. And such a pact is entirely based on a relationship of trust between actor and director. This dialectics of entrapment and freedom, inherent in the Huppert–Chabrol dynamics, in turn, echoes both the controlled violence that most of her characters embody, from Violette Nozière to Emma Bovary, to Marie (*Une affaire de femmes*), Mika (*Merci pour le chocolat*) and both Jeannes (*La Cérémonie* and *L’Ivresse du pouvoir*), and Chabrol’s own approach to filmmaking: as he himself admitted, he particularly thrives when under constraints (whether technical or financial).¹²

Interestingly, the butterfly/entomologist metaphor is, if not reversed, at least shared in *L’Ivresse du pouvoir* through a *mise en abyme* of the dynamics of the gaze. This was to be, perhaps fittingly, Huppert’s last appearance in a Chabrol film. Huppert, as Judge Jeanne Charmant-Killman (an oxymoronic pun of the type favored by Chabrol), is a director-like figure who exercises her power in order to investigate a deep-rooted web of corruption in the political and business world. She studies in depth and plays somewhat cruelly with each of the corrupt specimens who end up being interrogated in her office. The ferocity and relentlessness of the “entomological”/cinematic gaze seem to be shared here between director and actor/character, but not equally insofar as the gaze is also applied to the character of the judge herself. As it turns out, she is, ironically, the main character under scrutiny in the film. Her character is ultimately punished for her seemingly hubristic approach to power. The judge’s quasi entomological investigation into an evil and corrupted world does not get anywhere; corruption breeds corruption and Charmant-Killman (Huppert) ends up losing the battle on both professional and personal fronts. The judge’s position of absolute power is but an illusion as, ultimately, she is the one who is subjected to Chabrol’s gaze. While the camera remains a convincing, satirical tool for studying the mechanics of evil in *L’Ivresse du pouvoir*, Charmant-Killman’s gaze is ultimately powerless and she ends up being yet another butterfly in Chabrol’s diverse collection.

The Opacity of Evil

Huppert bluntly admitted during an interview for French magazine *Télérama* in 2000, “I like exploring monstrous instincts.”¹³ This allowed for considerable overlap with Chabrol whose cinema is marked by a fascination for madness, impulses, and the various figures of the “monstrous” with a view to rethinking the boundaries of normality (Dousteyssier-Khoze 2018, 72–103). This “encounter” saw Huppert undoubtedly encouraged by Chabrol to focus more specifically on the female monster, a figure which he had only started sketching in *Les Biches* and *Les Liens de sang/Blood relatives* (1978). Indeed, although Audran, like Huppert, often played the part of an outwardly cold, self-contained, “silent,” unreadable female character, she had never been cast by Chabrol as a killer. In Huppert, Chabrol the entomologist had found a new lead actor who was willing to let him conduct his study of rare specimens or “butterflies” as he saw fit and was prepared to go very far in their joint exploration of the deranged female psyche.

Huppert’s early performance as a cold-blooded killer in *Violette Nozière* is a defining moment in her career. From then onward, Huppert made a trademark of this combination of blank, opaque, distanced expression and underlying, contained violence. As *Violette*, she had already honed the art of ellipsis to perfection. Many of her subsequent performances (in *Rien ne va plus*, *Merci pour le chocolat* et *L’Ivresse du pouvoir* for Chabrol but also, famously, in Haneke’s *La Pianiste/The Piano Teacher* or Verhoeven’s *Elle*) follow the motto: show less in order to suggest more. And much has been written about Huppert as an internalized actor (see, for instance, Pierre Murat’s reference to her blank performance,¹⁴ and Delorme’s to “the mystery of her performance”¹⁵), to the point that it has become a clichéd default persona. But this was certainly one of the appeals for Chabrol insofar as it coincided with his own elliptical approach and aesthetics of opacity. The close-up shots on *Violette*/Huppert’s mask-like face (as in other films) are therefore used to conceal more than reveal. Chabrol might well have remembered Renoir’s lesson from *La Règle du jeu/The Rules of the Game* (1939)—a favorite film of his that he had watched more than eighty times—in that the close-up is often used by Renoir when a character withdraws within itself or a role and becomes a cipher (Dousteyssier-Khoze 2018, 84).

Huppert’s opaque performance captures to perfection the beast-or-saint opposition that is at stake in the film.¹⁶ *Violette*/Huppert carefully and

remorselessly watches her father swallow the lethal drink. Just like Mika in *Merci pour le chocolat*, she does not display any emotions. The extreme close-up on the father's blurry profile, with Violette's face in focus in the background, is exceptionally powerful: the hint of a smile on Violette's lips while she calmly stares at her father signing his death warrant (she had numerous occasions to "abort the mission" during the evening and repeatedly failed to do so) is the epitome of Violette as a "monster." But due to the very slow buildup toward the evening of the murder (the narrative is constantly distorted by a dizzying series of prolepses, ellipses, and flashbacks), the murder as defining moment and real core of the film occurs rather late (when the film is three-quarters through), at a time when the prolepsis of the prison and trial period is already far advanced. Thus, ironically, it is precisely at the point in the narrative when Violette reaches ultimate "monster status" that the other narrative (the prison/trial one) starts the opposite process of redemption and portrays Violette as a victim and a saint, thereby making the viewer's position decidedly uncomfortable. And indeed, the montage could not be more brutal: the shot right after the disturbing *rôti*/roast scene (in which there is a powerful medium shot of Violette/Huppert sitting at the dining table, holding the rare meat in her hands and tearing it with her teeth, while the bodies of her dead father and would-be-dead mother lie about in the apartment)¹⁷ shows a humble, repentant-looking Violette, sitting on her prison bed, refusing to eat the modest prison grub. Thanks to the distorted, dual narrative, Chabrol is able to switch within a few seconds from the iconography of the female Ogre or Monster to that of the Saint or Martyr (Violette/Huppert giving away her possessions and washing her cellmate's feet in prison). The perspectives on Violette/Huppert are therefore constantly shifting and constitute two paradoxical readings of Huppert/Violette's blankness of expression.

Stéphane Delorme stated that in the 1980s Chabrol's films were marked by "a cinema that is falsely simple, traversed by perversity and madness" and "Huppert's dissonant and detached performance incarnates this moment" (Delorme 2010, 1).¹⁸ This insightful comment could actually be said to apply beyond that timeframe and to pinpoint both a staple of Huppert's performances and of Chabrol's cinema. We have just seen two examples of the so-called detached performance, a well-known aspect of Huppert's persona. Let us now focus on a more overlooked but no less significant marker of Huppert's performances in Chabrol's films: dissonance, namely, the touch of falseness, incongruity, and rigidity that Huppert injects into her characters.

Huppert's Art of Dissonance or the Crystal-Character

An essential feature of Huppert's performances is indeed the uncanny sense of falseness, or out-of-tuneness, that seems to emanate from her characters. Although Jeanne (*La Cérémonie*) and Mika (*Merci pour le chocolat*) are very different (the former is chatty while the latter is, detached), they function equally well as examples of dissonant characters. They introduce cracks in the diegetic world and de-realize ever so subtly the narrative by making it more self-reflexive. Huppert's Chabrolean anti-heroines might indeed be referred to as "crystal-characters" in the sense that they are often highly reflexive and can contribute to the making of what Deleuze famously termed "crystal-images," that is, images in which actual and virtual interact: "automata and living beings, objects and reflections enter into a circuit of coexistence and exchange which constitutes a 'theatricality in the pure state'" (Deleuze 1985, 88). This is a key aspect of Huppert's performances and a significant vehicle for the opacity of evil so central to Chabrol's aesthetics. Two interconnected and complementary strategies of dissonance can be identified: the automaton or puppet-like character; and second-degree acting in self-reflexive performances. Both are used in order to provide a complex, nuanced, and, ultimately, blurred representation of evil and madness.

Stéphane Delorme, who interviewed Huppert for *Cahiers du cinéma* right after Chabrol's death in 2010, pointed out that in *Merci pour le chocolat* her character "seems almost like an automaton"¹⁹ (Delorme 2010, 24). Huppert replied that it was indeed a key component of Chabrol's vision, one she had tried to replicate through her performance as Mika because she was willing, above all else, to adhere to the director's vision and understanding of the character:

([Chabrol] said: "if we want [Mika] to climb up the curtain, she'll climb up the curtain." I was infinitely docile. That's my nature as an actor in a way. I tend to be empathic towards the character that is opposite me. I understood this mixture of control, of *laissez-faire*, of cruelty that he had in his way of seeing stories. And I am very porous, mimetic. It was a means of resembling him. In front of a strong director, actors are mimetic. (Delorme 2010, 24)²⁰

This type of mechanical, puppet-like performance is a recurring facet in Chabrol's *œuvre*: Landru/Charles Denner (*Landru* [1963]) is perhaps an extreme example of it but one could also think of Serrault's wonderfully incongruous and jerky performance as Labbé in *Les Fantômes du chapelier*/*The*

Hatter's Ghost (1982) and of Sandrine Bonnaire/Sophie in *La Cérémonie*. Such theatricality (and self-reflexivity) exemplified by the puppet/human dialectics is an intrinsic part of a Chabrolean aesthetics that constantly seeks to blur the border between illusion and reality, actual and virtual (Dousteyssier-Khoze 2018, 81). It makes it all the more difficult to read the characters who seem to be locked into the prison of their own subjectivities or pathologies and are ultimately unreadable, opaque. This automaton-like, mechanical quality treasured by Chabrol chimes perfectly well with Huppert's acting style and she will remember some aspects of it when playing in films directed by other directors. Huppert, for instance, confessed that Chabrol's advice on how to perform the role of the abortionist in *Une Affaire de femmes* (with utter, mechanical detachment, as if she were a plumber²¹) fed into her role in Haneke's *La Pianiste* (Pascal 2012, 201).

Huppert is perfectly aware of portraying complex, reflexive characters that we will refer to as "crystal-characters": "they are characters that become spectators on everything that happens to them. In all the films I have made with Claude, I am Chabrol's gaze on the film" (Delorme 2010, 23).²² In this type of self-reflexive or meta-performance, it becomes difficult to pin down and unpack the different layers of subjectivities. This detached performance often translates as a mask-like blankness through which the character acquires a reflecting/reflexive, elliptical, iceberg-like quality: there seems to be so much more happening beneath the surface, or, in that case, the face. The "crystal-characters" acquire what Deleuze, in his analysis of the close-up or the "affection-image," called a "reflexive or reflecting face": "We are before a reflexive or reflecting face as long as the features remain grouped under the domination of a thought which is fixed or terrible, but immutable and without becoming, in a way eternal" (Deleuze 1983, 100). These reflecting/reflexive crystal-characters, which are a key vehicle for the director's own gaze or vision, become the site of the exchange or interplay between "the actual and the virtual, the limpid and the opaque" (Deleuze 1985, 77), that is, for the dialectics that is at the heart of Deleuze's definition of the crystal-image, and Chabrol's cinema. In this respect, one could also think of Audran's performance at the end of *Le Boucher*, which has a decidedly reflecting/reflexive, "Huppertian" quality.²³ More seriously, and less anachronistically perhaps, one could indeed trace a genealogy of female ciphers or crystal-characters in Chabrol's filmography, with Audran and Huppert as key performers or agents of his aforementioned aesthetics of opacity.

Deleuze identified the concept of acting, and second-degree acting, as another key example of crystal structure. According to him, the actor is by essence a “monster”:

[The actor] makes the virtual image of the role actual, so that the role becomes visible and luminous. The actor is a “monster,” or rather monsters are born actors [...] because they find a role in the excess or shortcoming that affects them. But the more the virtual image of the role becomes actual and limpid, the more the actual image of the actor moves into the shadows and becomes opaque.

(Deleuze 1985, 75)

There are numerous examples in Chabrol’s filmography of crystal-characters (and actual “monsters”) appearing to act or over-act; they indulge in pure theatricality through quasi-parodic performances (as we shall see, this is the case of Huppert/Jeanne in *La Cérémonie*). The line between the actual and the virtual is blurred. This kind of reflexive, second-degree performance raises questions about representation: to be and to appear become inextricably linked. Thus, Mika/Huppert in *Merci pour le chocolat* is a polished hostess who is holding the Polonski household together. She is also running a chocolate factory and various charitable funds with efficiency and decorum; she masters the social codes and conventions of Swiss upper-middle class to such perfection that nobody would ever think of her as a (serial) killer. Appearances and superficial engagement with others are what allow her to keep up with the masquerade for so long undetected: the numerous close-up shots on her face only reveal a smooth, blank, contained canvas/mask (Dousteyssier-Khoze 2018, 112). But as Mika/Huppert confesses at the end, family relationships and love are nothing to her but performances or play-roles: “I, instead of loving, say ‘I love you’ and people believe me.”²⁴ In *Merci pour le chocolat*, the “real” is inseparable from the role, from the theatrical and Huppert, as a hyper reflective, intellectually driven actor, is ideal for the part. She devised specific strategies in order to make Mika look and sound slightly unnatural, incongruous, out of tune: besides the automaton-like gestures previously mentioned, Huppert also relied on her voice to help convey the controlled violence and madness of the character. As she explained during an interview with Stéphane Delorme, she resorted right from the beginning to what she called “intonations fausses”:

Ah yes, I found the tone from the start. I had said to Claude: I will speak like that. I had to find a kind of entrance into the film, and from the very first takes, I heard myself speak in a kind of way, with this slightly strange intonation that

didn't really belong to me completely. I spoke with a slight Swiss accent, for example, in the middle of a scene that is not about her, she comes back from the market and says a little too loudly: "I bought some salmon." It was a performance that was attacked from above, a bit too strong. It was also a means a little fixed of playing madness.

(Delorme 2010, 23)²⁵

By giving Mika these slightly off or false intonations, Huppert provides a clue to the artificial, performative nature of her character's actions and utterances. In *Merci pour le chocolat*, a form of over-coding or second-degree acting takes place, but it is difficult to identify where Mika's performance lies because there is nothing behind the mask or the role. And Chabrol's expressionistic *mise-en-scène* is the perfect complement to Huppert's dissonant performance. See, for instance, the magnificent, uncanny, painting-like shot of Mika/Huppert at the very end of the film. She is lying on the sofa next to a spider web-shaped shawl. Mika is clearly assimilated to a spider; the shot serves to reveal her venomous nature, something that her facial expressions can only allude to. This expressionistic dimension, which de-realizes the diegetic world and imbues it with a form of uncanny or defuse Gothic, pervades many of Chabrol's film (Dousteyssier-Khoze 2018, 26–7 and 132–7). But in *Merci pour le chocolat* Huppert's self-reflective performance, with its subtle "wrong notes," and Chabrol's expressionistic *mise-en-scène* are tuned to perfection in order to explore the depths and elusive nature of evil.

Huppert's memorable and slightly zany performance as Jeanne, the murderous postal clerk in *La Cérémonie*, allowed her to experiment with another form of dissonance. As mentioned in the introduction, it was Huppert's own decision to play the part of the chatty, vivacious postal clerk rather than the more prominent role of the silent, automaton-like maid, Sophie (played by Sandrine Bonnaire).²⁶ *La Cérémonie* is the only Chabrol film in which she did not play the lead role, and it shows her willingness not to be typecast as an exclusively introverted character. *La Cérémonie* remains one the most significant films for Huppert (she won a César for Best Actress, which she dedicated to Chabrol [Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 71]), as well as for Chabrol himself—the resounding success of the film, with critics and audiences alike, helped him re-launch his career, yet again, in the mid-1990s.

Huppert/Jeanne is a complex, working-class, possibly lesbian, character who hides a great potential for violence, and a deep-rooted hatred for the wealthy Lelièvre family, behind a bubbly, assertive, and superficially friendly manner. Huppert seems to have constructed her performance as Jeanne around incongruous details. Firstly, her character talks too much; Jeanne's speedy speech

tempo sounds somewhat false, out of tune. Thus, when she tells Sophie the story of the death of her child during the last car journey to the Lelièvre house, it feels somewhat unconvincing, rehearsed, performed. Is this the truth or lies? Was the death of her daughter really due to an unfortunate accident or did she kill her? Unlike Mika, Jeanne is very talkative but words do not “explain” her character; far from it, they only serve to reinforce her opacity.

Moreover, in a similar quest for dissonance, Huppert decided to wear girly pigtails and performs a little-girl act (Delorme 2010, 22): Jeanne ostensibly chews gum and wears short skirts, which clash with her character’s inner violence. Such incongruous touches make the character of Jeanne all the more destabilizing and difficult to read for the viewer. They are the outward signs that Jeanne is playing a part, hiding behind a mask. Indeed, there is a false playfulness about Jeanne, Huppert’s over-emphatic and self-reflexive performance veering toward parody, giving her character an edgy, chilling dimension. Her slight incongruousness and chattiness, combined with Sophie/Bonnaire’s stiffly mechanical performance, give the film an eerie sense of menace. Both are ultimately dissonant, enigmatic characters who remain unreadable until the very end.

Rien ne va plus or the Making of a Myth

Rien ne va plus stands out in the Huppert–Chabrol filmography for its sheer playfulness (it is a comedy) and reflexivity—not even the darker undertones quite manage to overshadow the unbearable lightness of mood of this faux caper movie. However, the reason for devoting a separate section to it rather lies in its unique status as Romanticized *film à clef* about the Chabrol/Huppert collaboration. According to Chabrol, the film functions as a self-contained bubble, or parallel universe; and it is at first hard to figure out what it is ultimately about, as Huppert pointed out (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 68). Chabrol playfully described it at the time as his most “autobiographical” film (he would later say the same of *Bellamy*, his last film). Although it is half intended as a joke or riddle (and the notion of “game” is indeed central to the film, as its title implies), Huppert tends to buy into the same idea: “[In *Rien ne va plus*] he recounts lots of things about his relationship with the cinema” (Delorme 2010, 22).²⁷ As Jacob Leigh points out, “[f]ilms about con artists offer ample opportunities to evoke the process of cinema; *Rien ne va plus* takes full advantage of these. Its self-reflexivity about film acting and film directing is explicit” (Leigh 2017, 65).

What is perhaps less explicit is that, through the film, Chabrol and Huppert are constructing a myth (in Barthes' sense of the word) about their own brand of filmmaking and performance: that of the mysterious, unspoken bond between two ultimately inseparable individuals. Indeed, it is especially tempting to see in *Rien ne va plus* an allegory of filmmaking in which the Betty-Victor duo functions as a distorted, idealized (and therefore mystifying) reflection of the Huppert-Chabrol pair.

Through the collapse of the boundaries between reality and illusion, the film seems to revolve around the notion of mask and (false) identity. The plot is so full of red herrings that the film becomes overtly self-reflexive. Betty/Huppert is perhaps the ultimate crystal-character in that she lacks any depth and is only defined via her different roles or performances. She has no stable personality or fixed hair color: as Huppert puts it, "it's when she's supposed to be real that she is false, and vice-versa. I was false when I was a redhead, I was masked beneath my own [hair] color" (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 68).²⁸ This can be seen as Chabrol's way of playing with Huppert's persona (Huppert, by saying "my own hair color," shows that she is fully aware of this) in a dizzying game of mirrors that constantly blurs the limits between character and actor; performance and "reality" (diegetic and extradiegetic); between actual and virtual. Betty has a collection of passports (and roles) but no real name; she is the ultimate actor and, as such, a distorted reflection of Huppert herself. Her only "real" or, at least, more genuine bond (with Victor/Michel Serrault), which is at the heart of the film, is the most mysterious of all. Indeed, it is impossible to pin down the relationship between Betty/Huppert and Victor/Serrault: they might be either father and daughter or lovers or associates, or a mix of the two. Chabrol was keen for this to remain a riddle, and it is worth noting that the relationship between Jeanne/Huppert and Félix (played by Chabrol's own son, Thomas Chabrol) in *L'Ivresse du pouvoir* is also perversely ambivalent.²⁹

Betty is the sum of her "performances" or masks. Only Chabrol's alter ego, Victor/Serrault, provides her with a sense of belonging and identity. Interestingly, during an interview entitled "Collusion" ("La connivence") for *Cahiers du cinéma* in October 1997, Huppert confirmed that her relationship with Chabrol got even stronger after *Rien ne va plus*. It is worth noting the interesting use of the term "connivence" (collusion) instead of the more neutral "complicité" (complicity). Huppert and Chabrol, it is playfully implied, are up to no good. They are joyful, witty partners-in-crime, just like Betty and Victor in *Rien ne va plus*. They speak the same language; they enjoy the same kind of

mysterious, elliptical but close bond. As between Betty and Victor, there is also much that remains unsaid between Huppert and Chabrol, according to Huppert: “what characterizes our relationship is really a kind of tacit agreement, a deep understanding” (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 68).³⁰ Jean-Michel Frodon, who commented on their rare alchemy, or bought into this somewhat Romanticized discourse,³¹ pointed out that there is much at stake in *Rien ne va plus* for the Huppert–Chabrol partnership:

Rien ne va plus [...] marks the veritable jump forward of the relation between the filmmaker and the actor, the exact opposite of the most fertile of the films they made together, *Madame Bovary*—Flaubert, Renoir, a performance-title like an interminable piece of bravery, costumes, accessories, culture, all that to hinder the freedom of working together. In *Rien ne va plus*, so few issues (with regards to its subject, story, references of all kinds) give way completely to the invention of something original between the filmmaker and the actor, including in the shadow of the delightful Michel Serrault. (Frodon 2006, 27)³²

While we may subscribe to some of Frodon’s views, including his harsh judgment on *Madame Bovary*, it seems that he is doing precisely what Chabrol and Huppert want the viewer to believe: that the relationship between the mysterious Huppert-Serrault characters helps shed light on the Huppert–Chabrol chemistry. Huppert herself endorses this mystifying Romantic discourse: “this quite mysterious relationship between Serrault and myself also expresses the magnetic, ambiguous rapport between a filmmaker and his actor, with all that this can bring in terms of desire, affection and performance/playfulness” (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 69).³³ *Rien ne va plus* is nothing short of a myth in the making that complements and cements the various comments by Huppert and Chabrol on their partnership during interviews.

Huppert openly resorts to the language of the myth when discussing the relationship between Victor and Betty: it defies temporality; it is “eternal,” as she put it (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 69). She has perfectly decoded and actively endorsed Chabrol’s subliminal message in *Rien ne va plus*. The film, which constantly moves across different genres (caper movie, comedy, thriller), ends on a parody of fairy tale: all is well that ends well, Victor and Betty are reunited. The snowy, chocolate-boxy, shimmering Swiss landscape is perfectly fitting for this hyper-reflexive film. It emphasizes the overall dream-like, artificial, timeless quality of the diegesis. Betty-Victor, just like Huppert-Chabrol, will always be ready for new adventures together: namely, to trick the gullible *bourgeois* in the diegetic world, and film viewers in the extradiegetic one. But this light, fairy-

tale note also serves to hide what the film is really about. Chabrol and Huppert both want *Rien ne va plus* to be seen as a *mise en abyme* of the unique and “enigmatic” relationship between an aging film director and his favorite partner. In other words, hiding behind the playful and light comedic elements, Chabrol and Huppert are creating together a Romantic myth about their own practices of *auteurship* and performance.

Conclusion

Right from *Violette Nozière*, by adopting a resolutely *auteurist* approach to performance, Huppert had unreservedly agreed to enter Chabrol’s imaginary and to help him bring to the screen strong, rebellious, multifaceted female characters. Together, they explored the ordinariness and opacity of human impulses and pathologies, and found a new visual grammar to express repressed violence. Huppert’s dissonant and self-reflexive performances play no small part in making the Chabrolean representation of reality flicker and in revealing its uncanny quality. As we have seen, mask-like faces, theatrical undertones, incongruous intonations, or automaton-like gestures all contribute to the formation of “crystal-characters.” Although they can vary in style and tone, these performances help shape and are ideal vehicles for Chabrol’s own Human Comedy and aesthetics of opacity. And Huppert gave some of her strongest performances to date as *Violette* (*Violette Nozière*), *Marie* (*Une affaire de femmes*), *Jeanne* (*La Cérémonie*), and *Mika* (*Merci pour le chocolat*). The exploration of madness, violence, and transgressive behaviors in those films provided her with experiences on which she could build when playing extreme characters for Haneke and Verhoeven, for instance.

When Chabrol died in 2010, Huppert was due to feature in his next project, an adaptation of *L’Escalier de fer* by Simenon, as a cold, sex-crazed homicidal maniac. They had already discussed the character in some detail. As Huppert recalls: “he had told me, for example, that in the novel, the character owns a bookshop/papershop, and he wanted to make of her a mechanic. That already told me a lot. He gave me the colors that I could arrange in my own way” (Delorme 2010, 23).³⁴ So, painter and his most trusted colorist/collaborator? Entomologist and butterfly? The metaphors abound but what *Rien ne va plus* and surrounding discourses in interviews have revealed, interestingly, is that both Huppert and Chabrol were particularly committed to presenting their

collaboration as a strong, mysterious bond and an unwritten pact and, in so doing, they invested together into a Romanticized, *auteurist* narrative about filmmaking.

We can only lament the fact that we are unlikely to ever see Huppert on screen as a deranged car mechanic. Given a shared fascination for repression, ellipsis, the monstrous in all its guises and self-reflexivity, Huppert and Chabrol were undoubtedly a perfect match, and they forged one of the most fascinating and unforgettable partnerships in French cinema and beyond.

Notes

- 1 “The common ground is to be found in the performances rather than in the characters. There was a connection between us [Chabrol and Huppert] that would perdure from film to film” [“Il y a des constantes dans l’interprétation, plus que dans les personnages. Quelque chose nous reliait et perdurait tout au long des films”].
- 2 “Je correspondais pour lui à l’idée du mal ordinaire. [...] Nous avons ouvert ensemble la boîte de Pandore.”
- 3 Thank you to the editors for attracting my attention to these two collaborations.
- 4 “À l’époque, j’avais envie de travailler avec Isabelle, et j’ai su que de son côté, elle souhaitait interpréter le rôle.”
- 5 “Oui, absolument. D’autant que dans le film nous étions mère et fille.”
- 6 Huppert said: “Our friendship really took off from *Une affaire de femmes* onwards” [“Notre amitié s’est vraiment scellée plutôt à partir d’*Une affaire de femmes*”] (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 66).
- 7 “Au début, j’avais l’impression qu’on se parlait très peu. Il y avait une sorte de *statu quo* entre lui et moi, un peu comme s’il se tenait à un poste d’observation. De film en film, peut-être parce qu’on se connaît mieux et que cela lui donne une sorte de liberté, on se dit plus de choses. [...] Travailler ainsi et depuis si longtemps avec quelqu’un, c’est unique. Dans une vie d’acteur, on travaille la plupart du temps pour la première et quelquefois pour la dernière fois avec un réalisateur. Le contraire est rare. Cela crée une relation singulière, à la fois très excitante, très rassurante, avec le sentiment que les choses ne se répètent jamais et que c’est une histoire sans fin. Le bonheur, donc...”
- 8 See for instance “*La Cérémonie*” 1995, DVD supplement or Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 66–71.
- 9 <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49340> [in English originally].

- 10 “J’ai un peu l’impression d’être, quand je tourne avec Claude Chabrol, un papillon pris dans un filet. Et le filet, c’est sa caméra. La façon dont il regarde ses personnages.”
- 11 Interestingly, this is a metaphor that Fassbinder previously denied to Chabrol, in a scathing article entitled “Insects in a Glass Case. Random thoughts on Claude Chabrol.” For Fassbinder, Chabrol is much more like a child cruelly observing insect-like characters in a glass case than an entomologist (Fassbinder 1976, 205–6 and 252).
- 12 See for instance the interview with one of his producers, Marin Karmitz: “Masques et bergamasques” (Jousse and Toubiana 1997, 72 and 74).
- 13 <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49340> [in English].
- 14 <https://www.telerama.fr/cinema/films/la-dentelliere,53448.php>
- 15 See Delorme 2016.
- 16 For the next two paragraphs, see Dousteysier-Khoze 2018, 92–3.
- 17 Odile Barski, who wrote the script (and departed here significantly from the book on which it is based), provided a powerful psychoanalytical/Freudian interpretation of Violette’s “abject” act (in the Kristevan sense).
- 18 “Un cinéma faussement simple, traversé par la perversité et la folie” / “le jeu dissonant et détaché d’Isabelle Huppert incarne ce moment”
- 19 “[D]ans *Merci pour le chocolat*, votre personnage semble presque un automate.”
- 20 [Chabrol] disait: “Si on demande [à Mika] de grimper au rideau, elle grimpe au rideau. J’étais d’une docilité infinie. C’est un peu ma nature d’actrice. J’ai tendance à être empathique avec le personnage qui est en face de moi. Je comprenais ce mélange de contrôle, de laisser-faire, de cruauté qu’il y avait dans son regard sur les histoires. Et je suis très poreuse, très mimétique. C’était une manière de lui ressembler. Devant un metteur en scène fort, les acteurs sont mimétiques.”
- 21 Huppert recalls: “Pour *Une affaire de femmes*, je me souviens que j’avais du mal à imaginer les gestes d’un avortement à l’époque, et [Chabrol] m’avait dit: ‘C’est un peu comme si tu faisais de la plomberie’” (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 68).
- 22 “[C]e sont des personnages spectateurs de ce qui leur arrive. Dans tous les films que j’ai faits avec Claude, je suis le regard de Chabrol sur les films”
- 23 See the striking series of close-up shots and counter-shots on Hélène/Audran’s expressionless face and the flashing lift button in the hospital. The close-up on Hélène’s blind gaze is mirrored into the flashing button; she looks hypnotized and seems to have turned into a puppet or ghost. Through this reflexive/reflecting face and non-gaze, Chabrol and Audran have introduced a pause in the film, a key moment for (self-)reflection, for thinking of what has happened and what Popaul and Hélène stand for (Dousteyssier-Khoze 2018, 49–52).
- 24 “Moi à la place d’aimer, je dis ‘je t’aime’, et on me croit.”

- 25 “Ah oui, j’ai trouvé ce ton dès le début. J’avais dit à Claude: je vais parler comme ça. Il fallait que je trouve une sorte d’entrée dans le film, et dès les premières prises, je me suis entendue parler d’une certaine manière, avec cette intonation un peu bizarre qui ne m’appartenait pas complètement. Je parlais un peu avec l’accent Suisse, par exemple, elle revient du marché et dit un peu trop fort au milieu d’une scène qui ne la concerne pas: ‘J’ai acheté du saumon!’. C’était un jeu attaqué un peu par-dessus, un peu trop fort. Elle est dans une hyper-présence. C’était aussi une manière un peu fixe de jouer la folie.”
- 26 Huppert claims, however, that Chabrol knew perfectly well that she would choose the part of the postal worker and that he only wanted to give her the “illusion” that the decision-making process was in her hands (Guerin and Taboulay 1997, 69).
- 27 “[Dans *Rien ne va plus*] il raconte beaucoup de choses sur son rapport au cinéma.”
- 28 “C’est quand elle était censée être vraie qu’elle était fausse, et vice-versa. J’étais fausse quand j’étais rousse, j’étais masquée sous ma propre couleur.”
- 29 Félix is Jeanne/Huppert’s husband’s nephew but there are sexual undertones to their relationship.
- 30 “Ce qui caractérise notre relation, c’est plutôt une sorte d’accord tacite, de compréhension profonde.”
- 31 “One should see them together on the set; nothing happens, barely a joke now and then, a smile, a memory. There is no ritual to speak of, even less resembling a real discussion. There is something akin to... a non-work-related rapport.” [“Il faut les voir ensemble sur le tournage, il ne se passe rien, à peine une vanne de temps en temps, un sourire, un silence, un souvenir. Il n’y a pratiquement pas de rituel, moins encore de débat de fond. Il y a quelque chose qui s’apparente à ... un rapport non aliéné au travail”].
- 32 *Rien ne va plus* [...] marque le véritable saut en avant de la relation entre le cinéaste et la comédienne, à l’exact opposé du moins fécond des films faits ensemble, *Madame Bovary*—Flaubert, Renoir, un rôle-titre comme un interminable morceau de bravoure, des costumes, des accessoires, de la culture, tout pour entraver la liberté du travail à deux. Dans *Rien ne va plus*, si peu d’enjeu (quant au sujet, à l’histoire, aux références de toutes natures) donnent toute la place à l’invention de quelque chose d’inédit entre le cinéaste et l’actrice, y compris dans l’ombre du réjouissant Michel Serrault.
- 33 “Cette relation un peu mystérieuse entre Serrault et moi, exprime également le rapport magnétique, ambigu entre un metteur en scène et son actrice, avec tout ce que cela peut comporter de désir, d’affection et de jeu.”
- 34 “Il m’avait dit, par exemple, que dans le roman, le personnage tient une librairie-papeterie, et qu’il voulait en faire une garagiste. Cela me disait déjà beaucoup de choses. Il me donnait des couleurs que je pouvais aménager à ma manière.”

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