

Elle [18] 2016 | France/Germany/Belgium | 130min

UK release date	10th March 2017
Director	Paul Verhoeven
Screenplay	David Birke
Cinematography	Stéphane Fontaine
Cast	Isabelle Huppert (Michèle Leblanc); Laurent Lafitte (Patrick); Anne Consigny (Anna)

You can read the provocative, strangely sardonic and icily arch psychodrama *Elle* in a number of contradictory ways. On one level, it's a tonally alarming tale of sexual violence and dangerous roleplay from the director of *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls*, the latter of which was cut by UK censors for potentially eroticising rape. On another, it's a jaw-dropping showcase for Oscar nominee Isabelle Huppert, cinema's most fearless screen presence, who describes the film as a "human comedy" about "the empowerment of a woman" with a "post-feminist" heroine. If the definition of intelligence is the ability to hold two contradictory thoughts in your head at the same time, then *Elle* is a movie designed to make its audience feel very smart indeed.

Adapted from Philippe Djian's novel *Oh...*, Verhoeven's first French-language feature opens with the ambiguous shrieks and grunts of a violent assault – a bloody violation, glimpsed in fragments, to which the film will return obsessively in variously reconfigured forms. The attack by a masked intruder is grotesque, but the aftermath is weirdly placid, as Huppert's businesswoman Michèle tidies up, bathes and casually orders sushi. "I fell off my bike," she tells her ineffectual son. Later, she informs colleagues: "It's over, it's not worth a debate."

Running a company that makes lurid, sexualised video games, Michèle turns a profit exploring and exploiting the dark fantasies of her consumers. But when obscene texts and videos suggest that her assailant is a workmate, she refuses to go to the police, haunted by memories of her monstrous father's arrest years ago ("never again"). Toughened by the past, and refusing to be defined as a "victim" (a label she was denied as a child), Michèle changes her locks,

learns about guns, and coolly sets about tracking her assailant. But to what end?

Like the sadomasochistic heroine of Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*, Michèle strives to orchestrate and control the narrative scenarios of her life and sexual identity. ("What role did she play?" asks a television documentary about her father's crimes). In sharp contrast, the men around her are weak and enfeebled, from the husband of best friend Anna (Anne Consigny) whom Michèle jerks off into a wastepaper basket at work, to her son who is humiliatingly emasculated by his girlfriend, to her ex-husband, a struggling writer now pathetically dating a lithe, literate fan ("The bimbos with big tits never worried me, but the one who's read *The Second Sex* will chew you up").

From *The 4th Man* to *Black Book*, the Dutch director has proved himself a multilingual agent provocateur, delighting in making audiences feel uncomfortable, daring them to be outraged. Yet despite a trio of male writers, it is Huppert's Michèle who dominates *Elle*, her steely resolve and indomitable presence somehow making her the author (or perhaps auteur) of her own story.

On the film I remain conflicted, but of Huppert I am in awe. She may not have won the Oscar but, frankly, she deserves every trophy going.

After Mark Kermode, *The Observer*, March 2017

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