Claude Chabrol and the Chocolate Factory

«Conserver l’apparence – c’est tout ce qui conte» says Isabelle Huppert in Merci pour le Chocolat (2000), to the management board of her Swiss chocolate company. It’s clear from the way she throws the line away that she has a lot to hide.

The French (and Swiss) bourgeoisie – if Chabrol is to be credited – cultivate a surface (une apparence) as few other bourgeoisies do; so his Hitchcockian obsession with stripping it away and showing the beasts which threaten its smugness, either from within it or without, has plenty to play with.

His interior designs are flashily discreet, and the actors he casts as servants and outsiders, deceptively humanoid – especially Sandrine Bonnaire and Huppert in La Cérémonie (1995).

Sometimes the hommages are a bit obvious, as when in La femme infidèle (1969), Michel Bouquet dumps the body of his wife’s lover into the swamp, and watches it, fixated, as it fails to sink. Sometimes they’re wittier. In Les fantômes du chapelier (1982), the chapelier has a wife whom we see only in rear shots, and who appears strangely static, never moving a muscle. We suspect she’s Norman Bates’s auntie, and there’s a big laugh when he whisks her wheelchair round, and she’s only a polystyrene dummy. This, too, at an early point in the action, not at the climax.

But you get, in Chabrol, as little violence as possible, and no striking locations. No chases across the roof of the British Museum; no murder attempts off the top of Westminster Cathedral – and certainly no shower scenes. Chabrol contents himself with just setting up a situation and milking it for all the tension he can.

His films are best second time round, when you know what’s coming. You see hints dropped, you know when people are lying, you appreciate the atmosphere of distrust which, often, should be there but isn’t: you can, of course, tell when characters are concealing, or pretending (which is, in many cases, all the time). Chabrol exploits mankind’s penchant for deception and hypocrisy, cover-up and hidden agenda, for all it’s worth. Second time round, his films are really disturbing. You see antagonisms building up. You notice things like the narrow-eyed look
Huppert gives to the back of Bonnaire’s head in *La Cérémonie*, in the rear seat of Jacqueline Bisset’s car. You notice the difference between Huppert’s slangy, demotic French (unlike the French Huppert speaks in any other film), and Bisset’s fluent-but-finishing-school French.

Hitchcock, however, would never have tolerated such gross violations of probability as rock Chabrol’s scripts over and over again: is it likely that, as happens in *Que la bête meure* (1969), Michel Dutchaussoy would have taken his dead son’s teddy-bear back to his Paris flat? It’s only there so that the girl-friend of his son’s killer can throw it at him. Would someone who looked like Aurore Clément be so hard-up as to need to open the door to so obvious a weirdo as the *Chapelier*, in the film about his *Fantômes*? Is it probable that, in the mid-nineties, the CD era, a rich family would record a televised opera, on a tape-recorder, live through the air? Had VHS not yet arrived in France? Yet this is what we’re supposed to be transfixed by in the last shots of *La Cérémonie*. Watching the speed and ease with which Michel Bouquet – a man set up from the film’s first scene as overweight and lacking exercise – gets the corpse into the car boot in *La Femme* …, you just have to close off part of your brain. Would the bad guy in *Que La Bête* … really have sent his enemy’s diary to his lawyer, inclosing as it did the evidence of his own crime? Is it likely that, in *La Femme* …, Michel Bouquet – elsewhere so circumspect – would have left his wife’s lover’s signed photo in the pocket of his jacket? Would so many people of doubtful parenthood really have ended up together under the same roof as we find in *Merci pour le Chocolat*? Would a woman, who loved her husband, and had two children by him of school age, really assist him in a suicide done to assuage his guilty conscience over a murder no-one cares about, as Stephane Audran does in *Juste Avant la Nuit*? No, she’d bully him into staying alive.

After half-a-dozen films, it looks deliberate.

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*Le Boucher* (1970) is in some ways Chabrol’s best and most characteristic film: expertly paced, beautifully shot and acted, the caves and cliffs of the Dordogne an excellent counterpoint to the bloody stress and mystery of the scenario. But we’re asked to think that the killer would have dropped, all casual, at one of his crime scenes, the very cigarette-lighter which the heroine had given him as a birthday present the previous day.

Perhaps it was a cry for help …
Perhaps he left it there because he thought it might turn her on …

But no, he wouldn’t have done it at all.

(More to the point – what was the heroine’s colleague’s wife doing there, to be killed in the first place?)

Chabrol insults you with these conveniences, as – I imagine – do the crap novels he takes his scenarios from. You can’t hang so many vital plot-twists on such instant implausibilities. You twitch with horror and cringe with embarrassment both at once – which can’t be right. The result is an ambition for profundity which constantly undermines itself with silly situations, and much acting which shows the bland professionalism of the uncommitted: watch the way Maurice Pialat autopilots through the part of the police inspector in the last reel of *Que La Bête* … and you’ll see what I mean. *Que la Bête* … opens and closes with Renoiresque long shots of isolated figures in vast landscapes and seascapes; but there’s no Renoiresque filling to the sandwich.

By contrast, Michel Serrault’s performance in *Les fantômes* …, as the serial killer with the polystyrene wife, is superb – detailed and truly lived-in.

*Les fantômes* … is in fact in colour.

When Chabrol’s plots convince, the twists are terrific. In *Juste avant la Nuit* (1971), there’s a long travelling shot along a pathway in which Michel Bouquet confesses to François Perrier that it was he who killed Perrier’s wife. We aren’t quite sure how Perrier felt about losing his wife, who was obviously trouble, and the way Chabrol directs it, with Bouquet just behind dimly lit, and Perrier in front lit slightly better, is mesmeric. Then the way Perrier reacts – eyes wide open, not shocked, sad for his friend, accepting the fact at once and forgiving at once, all with minimal change of expression, keeps you on the edge of your seat (or armchair).
Madame Bovary (1991) is a perfect vehicle for Isabelle Huppert, who explores the same area of psychotic destructiveness that she mines so successfully in La Cérémonie four years later and in Merci pour le Chocolat, five years after that. Like the novel, Bovary is detailed, depressing, and death-orientated: as might be expected, in its last reel Huppert acts death by rat-poison as if it’s been her life’s mission. A strange historico-political effect is achieved by casting as Rodolphe, Emma Bovary’s principal lover, an actor (Christophe Malavoy), who’s the spitting image of Tom Paine: though I don’t believe Chabrol intended it.

In so far as Flaubert’s novel is, like most of Chabrol’s work, a study of the way the provincial middle-class carries within it the seeds of its own horrible defeat, it fits his themes very well: but for a much less clinical more and more compassionate look at a nineteenth-century woman going to pieces, watch Isabelle Adjani in Truffaut’s L’histoire d’Adèle H.

Chabrol is obsessed by vicarious guilt. Vicarious suffering, we know about. But in Les fantômes … it is Charles Aznavour, the Armenian tailor, who dies of psychosomatic pneumonia, devastated, because he is bearing the blood-guilt which his neighbour the hatter seems not to feel. In Le Boucher, we never escape the idea that, even before she finds and conceals the improbable cigarette-lighter, Stéphane Audran knows in some obscure way that the butcher is committing the murders for her: that’s why she can’t go to the police about them. We’re all implicated, implies Chabrol. As he bleeds to death in her passenger-seat, the butcher (Jean Yanne), confesses all – straight to camera.

It’s as if Tippi Hedren really had brought the birds with her.
Michel Bouquet’s problem in Juste avant la Nuit is that he can’t get rid of his guilt by confessing. No-one will condemn him – not his wife, not his best friend, husband to the woman he murdered – so his guilt stays locked inside him. «La paix que je desire, tu ne peut pas me le donner» he says to his wife, at three in the morning. She argues that, as no-one shares his evaluation of his guilt, he’s not guilty – his conscience is a kind of masochism. Whereas what keeps the mad chapelier killing is the knowledge that the masochistic Aznavour is suffering his guilt for him: when Aznavour dies, he has at last to feel guilty himself, and give himself away by falling asleep next to the corpse.

The political subtext to Le Boucher is Indo-China and Algeria – it’s the violence he saw there that sent the butcher crazy (though it wasn’t what sent the heroine into a sublimation of her sexuality). But it’s a remote subtext.

Nada (1974) gets much more political, very fast: « Le terrorisme gauchiste et le terrorisme étatique sont les deux machoires du même piège à cons » is a statement which recurs; and leaves itself more open to debate than what we see at one point scrawled in red across a fence : « RICHES VOTRE PARIS EST ENCERCLÉ ON LE BRÛLE » which doesn’t invite a verbal response at all.

It’s the sort of film Godard should have been making all the time: but is too good to be by him.

A group of miscellaneous gauchistes kidnap the American ambassador to Paris, from a high-class brothel. They seem, despite their political incoherence, to cohere socially, which is more than can be said of the police chief and interior minister who track them down. The minister more or less tells the police chief to kill them all, even though it means the death of the ambassador: when he does kill most of them, and they do kill the ambassador, the minister sacks him. Were the police chief not such a joyful, laid-back sadist, we might feel a bit sorry for him; instead, when the one surviving gauchiste blows his head off with a shotgun, we feel that justice of a kind has at last been done.

But because the film doesn’t really give us anyone sympathetic to focus on, and because the gauchisme of the gauchistes is so noisy and ill-defined, it’s hard to get

Some of Chabrol’s middle-class people are real and loving – in *Juste avant la Nuit*, everyone likes the chocolate cake that Stephane Audran makes, which can’t be said when Huppert makes it in *Merci* ... But Audran’s husband is a murderer, a liar, and a hypocrite: and as the family munch her lovely cake, he sits down calmly at the piano and plays *Erbarme dich, mein Gott* ... from the St Matthew Passion. And when, in *La Cérémonie*, the daughter defies Sandrine Bonnaire’s attempt at blackmail and reveals that she’s pregnant, her parents don’t react as she feared, but accept it at once: it’s the working-class psycho Bonnaire who’s deficient in human sympathy.

*La Cérémonie*

At first you think the conflict in *La Cérémonie* is going to be class-based, have-nots versus haves. You can see Huppert’s envy of such luxury, when Bonnaire shows her over her employers’ residence. Then, the second time round, you begin to wonder why Bonnaire can’t be frank about her dyslexia – or is it simple illiteracy? – and whether Jean-Pierre Cassel is right to think that Huppert is tampering with his mail. You notice that, just as Cassel takes refuge in classical music on the stereo, Bonnaire takes refuge in non-stop rubbish the telly. By the time he phones through for a folder he’s left behind, and she’s so scared she won’t be able to identify which one that she locks herself in her room, you know she’s abnormal … or subnormal … or something. You notice that she and Huppert – both thirtyish – are by now sporting the same girlie pigtails.

By the time Huppert, forbidden the house, jumps up on down on the *lit matrimoniale* and spills chocolate over it, you know the corridor separating the kitchen from the front room isn’t just a class divide, nor even a divide between those who are lucky enough to have a family and those who aren’t: it’s a divide between those whom life has allowed to become people, and those whom it’s condemned to be half-people.

With the sofa in the front room littered with corpses, you turn the DVD off with relief.