

Article

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## Paul Verhoeven and His Feminist Discourse Subversion, Transgressions and the Femme Fatales



*Paul Verhoeven*

Cinema has the ability to challenge, thwart and maintain the status quo of the hegemonic dominance of the system. Paul Verhoeven chooses the arduous way. His maverick choices of stunningly astounding subject matter of the narrative elevated him into one of the finest filmmakers of our time. Aboriginally from the Netherlands, Paul is mostly seen and celebrated as a successful Hollywood Director. In his decade-long career, he started directing Dutch films; his *Turkish Delight* (1973, 108mins) won Best Foreign Film Oscar, but his stint with Hollywood since the 80s won him accolades. Especially his erotic thriller *Basic Instinct* which catapulted him to the Hall of Fame and evoked questions about desire, sexuality, morality and murder. This article doesn't intend to pen down his biographical note but wishes to delve deeper into the characters he portrayed in his films.

He has left an indelible mark on popular culture. His films combine a European arthouse sensibility with the US blockbuster but in a wickedly satirical way. His American dystopic trilogy – *Robocop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990) and *Starship Troopers* (1997) – provided dark visions of futuristic metropolises that continues to resonate to this day, touching on capitalism, robotics, biopolitics, posthumanism, urban planning, artificial intelligence, transhumanism and climate change, while female-led dramas, such as *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Showgirls* (1995), *Black Book* (2006), *Elle* (2016) and *Benedetta* (2021), remain controversial for their overt eroticism, sexual violence and representation of lesbianism. To him, Sex and Violence are the two predominant constituents of the world. And his array of films validated his truth. His filmmaking trajectory reached



***Basic Instinct (1992)***

a different dimension since *Basic Instinct* happened to him. He seemed to have found his forte as a filmmaker later. This article proposes to cater to the diabolical films he directed that shed light on the deep darker corner of the human mind, highlighting the immensely controversial *Basic Instinct* to his tryst with vivacious Isabelle Huppert in *Elle*, to his latest *Benedetta* (2021,132mins) where he questions multiple secrets of human selves about the other beings in the society.

What appeals to us is his precision in citing the clandestine unconscious of mortal beings, something society and social beings choose to ignore. In actuality, through these concealed selves, we re-discover ourselves. His métier caters for the fact that, for him, in the unconscious lies the real quintessence of any living beings. The intensity of emotion can lead the characters into a cobweb of moral and ethical dilemmas that, in turn, negotiate with their subtle vulnerability. His primary characters in both *Basic Instinct* and *Elle* demand our undivided attention as both of them reveal a classic example of Freud's dictum that while the unconscious mind is largely inaccessible, the contents can sometimes bubble up unexpectedly, such as in dreams or these films to the extent of sexuality entangled with inner violence.

Sexual repression, or the diabolic nature of the human self, is nearly inescapable. In *Basic Instinct*, played by Sharon Stone, Catherine Tramell uses her sexuality explicitly as a weapon of power. Her uninhibited being challenges and questions the

thin line of difference between morality and immorality. Society abhors her but cannot escape her undeniable presence. Foucault's discussion on four sources of knowledge and power that constructed sexual discourse enumerates one particular source called "psychiatrisation of perverse pleasure" that intends to control perversions. Still, in elaborating that, Foucault adds that the power and pleasure dynamic contributes to a higher desire for and frequency of sexual perversions<sup>1</sup>.

Keeping that in mind, if we discuss his French film *Elle*, with Isabelle Huppert in it, we land in an abyss of extremely disturbing, exceedingly revealing drama that revolves around the politics of Rape. These three films are women-centric, but their women are not meek or mere objects of the 'male gaze'. They assert their existence in every possible way, sometimes in a twisted manner. Michèle Leblanc, an alluring Huppert, comes alive as a successful feisty entrepreneur, living a domineering life unless she gets raped by a masked man. In different circumstances, this kind of character would have reacted differently. But Michèle, aka Huppert, not only recommences her life the next moment but also takes charge of the situation. She investigates every other possible suspected perpetrator and eventually identifies the culprit. What happens next is the crux of the film; she allows herself to enjoy the heinous act, otherwise considered as 'grey rape', that vacillates between consent and assault.



***Benedetta (2021)***

This violating yet ambiguous act could have turned into a revenge drama. Instead, Verhoeven empowers the central character. She doesn't play the victim,



instead takes charge of her predicament. Her positionality between attraction, violence and approval remains so provocative that the audience needs to decipher the undercurrents of her otherwise distorted persona. In several interviews, Huppert called this character to have advocated post-feminism in some way. Post-feministic ideology is a new form of empowerment, individual choice, independence, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humour and (sexual) pleasure, and the renewed focus on the female body can be considered important for this contemporary feminism. Unlike second-wave feminism, new-power feminists don't play victims. "The second wave's reliance on women's victim status as a unifying political factor is seen as disempowering and outdated and therefore should be replaced with 'power feminism' that is 'unapologetically sexual', 'free-thinking', 'pleasure-loving' and 'self-assertive'. Post-feminism celebrates sexuality and says that women can be more empowered in this way; they are free to choose and liberated. It also says women can be empowered by working in the sex industry as strippers and adult film stars.



*Elle (2016)*

Therefore, though an out-and-out uncomfortable film for many, *Elle* caters to Foucault's concept of repressed sexuality (applicable to the character Patrick, the assailant) and the changing nature of power dynamics in a man-woman relationship where there is a crucial role reversal in this film. Belittling any woman for sheer sexual gratification without her consent is a grave offence; however, if the woman takes charge and indulges in that very sexual act, she is actually changing the rules of the game! The film also narrates the multiple

subtexts of men inhabiting the world of Michelle. They are all losers, fading figures, weak. The film ends positively when her friend Anna offers to move in with her. Michele had a brief affair with Robert, Anna's husband, but Michele confesses that this incident helped her evolve as a person.

*Benedetta* (2023,132mins) is a savage film. Too severe for the believers, the film is based on a novel by Judith C. Brown. The film is loosely based on the 1986 non-fiction book *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. The plot revolves around a church run by Nuns; *Benedetta*, a nun in the 17th century, joins an Italian convent while a young child and later has a lesbian love affair with another nun while seeing religious visions. Verhoeven always has raised disconcerting questions that might shake the core of any society or institution. In this film, he explores sexual freedom, religious beliefs, and their intersection. This is a deadly and prohibited zone; we seldom allow ourselves to stride on that path. But Paul is different; he loves uneasy areas of life and searches for the answers by fluttering around them. *Benedetta* is no exception. Sexuality and Religion always had an unholy marriage between themselves throughout history. Sexuality has been considered moral only if performed within the contours of Marriage. Any other sexual activity without the purpose of reproduction is/was considered immoral. As Mother Mary symbolises purity, Christianity believes all women should be like that. Any deviant sexual activity is termed moral transgression; eroticism must be controlled. In *Benedetta*, what the young nun did is a moral and ethical aberration according to the authorities; for that, she has to be reprimanded. She was threatening the rules of the institution and was accused of blasphemy. Verhoeven thus succinctly invites us to witness the other side of religion and its tryst with forbidden relationships.

In *Black Book* (2006, 106mins), Verhoeven again successfully portrayed a powerful woman character, Rachel Stein, brilliantly played by Carice van Houten, a Dutch singer and actress. After a long hiatus, Verhoeven returned to his homeland, the

Netherlands, to make this film about a volatile period of history. To quote him, “In this movie, everything has a shade of grey. There are no people who are completely good and no people who are completely bad. It's like life. It's not very Hollywoodian”.



*Black Book (2006)*

Racheal plays a Jew woman who tries to escape the claws of Nazis in the occupied Netherlands. The film describes her bravery, her invincible nature and her turbulent journey through the alleys of history. That character is memorable and deserves to remain in our memory. The distinctive identity created by Verhoeven for himself deserves our attention as the way he switched over from one genre to another, mastering them all, demands our

applause, which he has received worldwide over the years. His women characters can be described as *femme fatales*, one of the canonical ideas of female empowerment. Though *femme fatale*, the very idea is shrouded with ambiguities as sometimes, they may evoke anxiety/jealousy among fellow beings, otherwise, they are archetypes of power, violence, death, and erotic desire. All these elements were present in the characters mentioned above. Verhoeven's *femme fatales* are empowered women who thwart the mainstream tropes of considering women as caregivers, not as independent individuals with their bent of mind. These disobedient women are the makers of history, not the conformists, because you cannot conform and bring a revolution. Sometimes, it's the utmost necessity to subvert the age-old, conservative patriarchy to ensure women's empowerment. Women's goals are not yet fulfilled; there are, yet, too many hindrances to deal with. Catherine Trammell in *The Basic Instinct*, Michele in *Elle*, and Racheal in *The Black Book* are the hyper-feminine symbol of empowerment that chronicles the simmering tales of iron determination and grit. These alluring women do not fit into the usual tropes of the Madonna vs Whore binary but assert their strong presence within the contradictions and absences in society.

**Reference:**

1. Foucault, Michel: *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, New York, Vintage Books, 1990, Pp:45-46
2. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Post Feminism: Cultural texts and theories*, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, P:64

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