

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Claude Chabrol



GUY AUSTIN

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Contents

LIST OF PLATES	<i>page</i> vi
SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
1 Chabrol and friends	1
2 The new wave	12
3 The Hélène cycle	42
4 Family plots	82
5 The power of the gaze	107
6 Stories of women	125
7 Master of <i>Cérémonie</i>	150
Afterword	170
FILMOGRAPHY	174
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	191
INDEX	193

List of plates

1	Jean-Claude Brialy as François in <i>Le Beau Serge</i> (1958)	page 37
2	Chabrol and Stéphane Audran on the set of <i>Juste avant la nuit</i> (1971)	38
3	Michel Bouquet as Charles and Stéphane Audran as Hélène in <i>Juste avant la nuit</i> (1971)	38
4	Donald Sutherland as detective Steve Carella in <i>Blood Relatives</i> (1978)	39
5	Isabelle Huppert as Violette and Jean-François Garreaud as Jean in <i>Violette Nozière</i> (1978)	39
6	Alan Bates as Marsfeldt and Jennifer Beales as Sonia in <i>Dr M</i> (1990)	40
7	Chabrol filming <i>Dr M</i> (1990)	40
8	Isabelle Huppert as Jeanne and Sandrine Bonnaire as Sophie in <i>La Cérémonie</i> (1995)	41

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Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent on national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as an art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about *auteurism*. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessary

coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the *auteur* perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the informal and formal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERT INGRAM

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1

Chabrol and friends

In the autumn of 1997, at the age of 67, Claude Chabrol released *Rien ne va plus*, his fiftieth film. The leading French film magazine, *Cahiers du cinéma*, marked the occasion with a special issue devoted entirely to his work. The editorial described him as ‘le cinéaste français le plus productif, et peut-être le plus “rentable”, des quatre dernières décennies’¹ (Toubiana 1997:4). (His achievement is all the more remarkable when one notes that in recent years several previously successful French film directors have been more or less obliged to abandon the cinema, including Léos Carax, Jean-Jacques Beineix and Bertrand Blier.) Chabrol’s forty-year career is in some ways a history of recent French cinema and society: neorealism, the new wave, the trauma of the Algerian War, the political legacy of 1968, the rise of the consumer society and the ‘pompidolien’ bourgeoisie,² the perennial popularity of the thriller, the tension between television and cinema, the decline of Marxism. Chabrol has known periods of great success (the launching of the new wave in 1958, the superb *Hélène* cycle of the late 1960s – including his most famous film *Le Boucher* – his return to form in the 1990s), and also periods of inactivity and failure (a year in the early 1960s without shooting a single scene, a general loss of direction in the late 1970s). Twice he has relaunched his

1 ‘the most prolific and perhaps the most “profitable” French film-maker of the last four decades’

2 That is to say, the bourgeoisie of 1969–74, the period of Georges Pompidou’s presidency.

career, with the comeback films *Les Biches* in 1967 and *Poulet au vinaigre* in 1985. Through it all, Chabrol has seen his artistic reputation questioned because of the sheer volume and perceived inconsistency of his output.

Until recently, Chabrol suffered from a paradoxical reputation as simultaneously lazy and prolific: lazy in his uncritical acceptance of any project that came along, prolific in the number of such projects that made it to the screen. His own belief was that 'la première qualité d'un musicien, c'est de composer, d'un écrivain, d'écrire, d'un peintre de peindre, d'un cinéaste de filmer'³ (Chabrol 1976: 353). But his willingness to accept commissions and to be a director for hire flew in the face of the new wave conception of the film director as an *auteur*, a sacred, isolated artistic figure. In contrast with this Romantic conception of cinema as art rather than commerce, and as solitary rather than collective, Chabrol has always acknowledged and enjoyed the fact that cinema is most often a collective, commercial enterprise. This has implications for his filming methods and his choice of popular genres, as we shall see. However, it has also resulted in neglect or condescension from the critics. For twenty years, between 1962 and 1982, *Cahiers du cinéma* (for which he himself once wrote in the 1950s) did not interview Chabrol once. In 1976 he could say without fear of contradiction that 'je suis plus respecté hors de nos frontières qu'en France'⁴ (Chabrol 1976: 231). Five years later, *Cahiers* was still ranking him in French cinema's second division.⁵ But the last ten years or so have seen a gradual reassessment of his work. On the release of *La Cérémonie* in 1995, *Cahiers* asked if Chabrol was not in fact le plus grand cinéaste français'.⁶ Two years later, with the publication of the *Cahiers* special issue, Chabrol's belated critical rehabilitation was complete. (Their previous neglect of Chabrol is further illustrated by the fact

3 'a musician must compose, a writer must write, a painter must paint, and a filmmaker must film'

4 'I am more respected abroad than in France'

5 In the first division were the usual (new wave) suspects, Godard, Truffaut, Rohmer and Rivette. See Blanchet 1989:120.

6 'the greatest French film-maker'. See the editorial of *Cahiers du cinéma* 494, p. 22.

that *Cahiers* had long since devoted special issues not just to his contemporaries such as Godard and Duras but also to the newcomer Leos Carax and, ironically, to one of Chabrol's favourite actresses, Isabelle Huppert. Most tellingly, Carax merited a special issue for his third film – Chabrol only for his fiftieth!

Chabrol's films break down the dubious critical barrier between art cinema and popular cinema. Commercial as well as artistic considerations are crucial to his film-making, and he remains disdainful of those directors (like Godard) whose films are elitist rather than populist. Chabrol sees no shame in considering himself a craftsman and takes pride in bringing his films in on or under budget. For *L'Œil du malin* in 1961, he even agreed to shoot the film at half the originally agreed cost. His pragmatic and practical approach to cinema dates from the early 1960s, when a series of box-office disasters (including, ironically, *L'Œil du malin*) left him unable to find financial support for any more personal projects. In order to keep filming, he decided to accept various comedy-thrillers and spy movies considered (by his colleagues in the new wave) artistically beneath him. In the terms of the *politique des auteurs*, he had become a *metteur en scène* rather than a *cinéaste*.⁷ But it was this commercial and auto-didactic period which made Chabrol. It allowed him to hone his technical skills and to come to terms with popular genres, thus paving the way for his mature style of the late 1960s and 1970s. Since that period, he has been happy to take on projects suggested by others as well as those he has long nurtured himself. He has also shot films – such as *Le Cri du hibou* in 1987 – against the advice of his regular producer (in this case, Marin Karmitz, who refused to be involved in the project). For Chabrol, cinema has to be learned by filming (not by writing about it, hence his dismissal of film criticism, including his own for *Cahiers* in the 1950s). And one must never be afraid to get one's hands dirty on a supposedly inferior or unworthy project: 'il ne faut pas avoir peur de tremper les mains dans la merde s'il le faut pour tirer des choses'⁸ (Biette *et al.* 1982: 6). The

7 In other words, according to the new wave conception of the film-maker, he had become a director for hire rather than a true artist.

8 'you mustn't be afraid to put your hands in the shit to get something out'

result is a filmography which contains turkeys (*Folies bourgeoises*, *Quiet Days in Clichy*) as well as masterpieces (the Hélène cycle, *Betty*, *La Cérémonie*), but which is finally being recognised as a landmark in French cinema.

Typically, Chabrol's autobiography is published not in an *auteurist* cinema collection but in the series 'Un homme et son métier'.⁹ For him, directing is a job which can be demystified from the *auteurist*/Romantic idea of it. His concept of cinema privileges the spectator as well as the creator – hence the importance of genre in his work, since it is often via the expectations aroused by popular genres that a spectator approaches a given film. Rejecting the avant-garde and the experimental, Chabrol chooses (even when he doesn't have to, financially speaking) to work within the confines of established genres. In 1979 he declared that 'I've always tried to hold on to the cinema of genre because I think it's the only way to make films. These days in France, but not only there, one veers mostly towards an overly intellectual vision of things, and I think the only solution is to make some good *policiers*, some good soap-operas and comedies' (Yakir 1979: 2). Chabrol has in fact filmed farce (*Folies bourgeoises*), melodrama (*La Rupture*), fantasy (*Alice ou la dernière fugue*), war films (*La Ligne de démarcation*, *Une affaire de femmes*), spy films (the *Tigre* series and *La Route de Corinthe*) and glossy literary adaptations (*Quiet Days in Clichy*, *Madame Bovary*). But the crime thriller is his usual choice of genre, because it allows him to engage the spectator via the plot, and then explore the complexities of character, morality, society and politics within an accessible and satisfying framework. Or as he puts it, 'c'est le genre qui emmerde le moins le public'¹⁰ (Sorg 1998: 35). He has often been described as specialising in the psychological thriller, but this is slightly misleading. Although he is greatly interested in character and situation, Chabrol does not concern himself with psychology as an area of knowledge. Human motivations remain obscure rather than transparent. Actions (particularly crimes) and

9 'One man and his job', published by Robert Laffont. Includes accounts by a private detective, an agronomist, a king, and, despite the series title, by a businesswoman and a (female) singer.

10 'it's the least boring genre for the audience'

their consequences are shown in uncompromising – and often blackly comic – detail, but no comforting explanations are given. As Chabrol says, ‘mon grand plaisir, c’est de révéler l’opacité’¹¹ (Guérin and Jousse 1995: 30). This is particularly true of his female characters. How much do we learn about the enigmatic and ultimately disembodied¹² female protagonists of films such as *Le Boucher*, *Les Innocents aux mains sales*, *Violette Nozière*, *Betty* and *La Cérémonie*? Even the male characters – whose psychology is often less obscure – tend to maintain an ambivalence which thwarts simple definitions of good and evil. From *Le Beau Serge* and *Les Cousins*, via *Que la bête meure* and *Le Boucher*, to *Masques* and *Le Cri du hibou*, they are simultaneously victims and perpetrators. Moral relativism is the recurrent theme of Chabrol’s work: ‘my “great testament,” my “definitive message” is ... Don’t judge!’ (Yakir 1979: 5).

Although there is a personal (moral) imperative underlying Chabrol’s films, their means of production is collective. This is of course true of almost all films, but with Chabrol there is great emphasis on the contribution of the film crew. From his very first films, Chabrol built up a trusted team which has continued to work with him more or less throughout his career. The heart of the crew has been as follows: Jean Rabier (cinematography), Guy Chichignoud (sound), Pierre Jansen (music), Jacques Gaillard/Monique Fardoulis (editing). There have also been favourite actors at various periods of Chabrol’s career, including Jean-Claude Brialy, Michel Bouquet, Jean Yanne, Stéphane Audran and Isabelle Huppert. Audran and Huppert have been especially important, incarnating the enigmatic and ultimately unknowable heroines of some of Chabrol’s most famous work. Audran was Chabrol’s second wife, and has appeared in over twenty of his films, from *Les Cousins* in 1958 to *Betty* in 1992. Above all, she starred in the Héléne cycle of 1968–71, in which she embodied the bourgeoisie of the period and facilitated Chabrol’s ambivalent attitude towards it: ‘Elle en représente une idéalisation ... L’idée était que les films devenaient doubles: à la fois

11 ‘my great pleasure is to reveal opacity’

12 Many of these films end with a close-up of the protagonist’s face, apparently floating in space.

une satire de la bourgeoisie et un aboutissement, une sorte de modèle'¹³ (Jousse and Toubiana 1997: 8). In 1978, Isabelle Huppert took the lead in *Violette Nozière* while Audran played her mother. The torch was in a sense being passed from one to the other, with Huppert going on to work regularly with Chabrol over the next two decades.

Always a metaphorical family, Chabrol's film crew has recently become something of a literal family too. His third wife Aurore is still the 'script-girl' (as she has been since the 1970s) and his stepdaughter Cécile Maistre is now the first assistant. One of his sons, Matthieu, composes the score (replacing Pierre Jansen in 1982), while another, Thomas, has appeared in *Une affaire de femmes*, *Madame Bovary*, *Betty* and *L'Enfer*. Chabrol has always been renowned for his good humour on the set, and for the affection generated within his film crews, actors included: 'La création se fait mieux dans la joie. Pourquoi ne pas vivre en bons compagnons, être doux les uns avec les autres, de temps en temps faire la fête, en tout cas se marrer le plus souvent possible, bien bouffer.'¹⁴ (Chabrol 1976:186). It may well be that the relaxed atmosphere of his shoots and his well-known love of good food and drink added to his long-standing reputation as a casual film-maker. It is certainly true that he filmed *Ten Days' Wonder* in Alsace solely in order to enjoy the local cuisine, and that he was drunk for most of the shoot on *La Ligne de démarcation*. But his attitude remains unchanged. As he recently told *Télérama* on the set of his fifty-first film, *Au cœur du mensonge*, 'On ne sait jamais si un film sera réussi ni s'il aura du succès.... Par contre, on peut toujours réussir le tournage, et en faire un succès'¹⁵ (Sorg 1998: 35).

Although Chabrol wrote some of his most famous films alone (including *La Femme infidèle* and *Le Boucher*), he collaborated with

- 13 'She represents an idealisation of it ... The idea was that the films became double-edged: at the same time a satire on the bourgeoisie and its culmination, a kind of model'
- 14 'Creativity is aided by happiness. Why not be good friends, why not be nice to each other, live it up now and then, in any case have a laugh as often as possible and eat well?'
- 15 'You never know if a film will work, nor if it will be a success. On the other hand, you can always make the filming work, and make it a success'

his friend Paul Gégauff on many screenplays over the first twenty years of his career. Perhaps the most productive influence within Chabrol's crew, Gégauff was also the most destructive personality. Chabrol first met him in 1950 at Le Celtic film club in the Latin Quarter of Paris. Chabrol was in the audience as Gégauff, dressed as a Nazi officer, interrupted the screening of a British war film to complain that it was in bad taste. This anecdote encapsulates Gégauff's dangerous appeal: a dandy and a joker, a Germanophile, a scourge of good taste, of bourgeois manners and morals. He was also, in the early 1950s, a successful novelist and something of a playboy. He became an influence on several of the young new wave directors, including Eric Rohmer and Jean-Luc Godard. To Chabrol, he became a close friend and a fascinating model of cynicism and amorality. Gégauff's apparent racism and right-wing views, like his drinking and womanising, made a tantalising contrast with Chabrol's own left-wing humanism, and his status as a Catholic family man.¹⁶ The attraction and contrast between Chabrol and Gégauff was to be represented time and again in two character types, Charles and Paul. (Usually they are male rivals for Hélène, a female character based to a degree on Stéphane Audran.) Charles is an ironic version of the young Chabrol: innocent, reserved, repressed. Paul is Gégauff: cynical, charismatic, provocative. Established in 1958 with *Les Cousins*, Chabrol's second film and the first on which Gégauff collaborated, the pairing was to reappear, with slight variations (and changes of name) in *Les Godelureaux* (Arthur and Ronald), *Les Biches* (Paul), *La Femme infidèle* (Charles and Victor), *Que la bête meure* (Charles and Paul), *Le Boucher* (Charles and Popaul), *La Rupture* (Charles and Paul), *Juste avant la nuit* (Charles), and *Docteur Popaul* (Popaul). The series culminated in 1974 with *Une partie de plaisir*, after which Gégauff's dandies tend to disappear from Chabrol's work. (The final film collaboration between the two was *Les Magiciens* a year later, featuring a dandy called Édouard. It was a commercial disaster, and Chabrol reckons it is one of his very worst films.)

¹⁶ Although Chabrol has always maintained that Gégauff's racism was simply a ploy to wind up left-wingers like himself, Antoine de Baecque, in an excellent essay, has accused Gégauff of genuine anti-Semitism. I have made use of this essay (de Baecque 1997) for my account of Gégauff's life and death.

Une partie de plaisir dramatises – and hence exorcises – the power of Gégauff's personality. That power is described by Chabrol as follows: 'Il fascinait par son côté jusqu'aboutiste dans l'autodestruction, un goût du paradoxe extraordinaire et une élégance vraie. Mais il m'a montré également jusqu'où cette direction pouvait aller dans l'autodestruction'¹⁷ (de Baecque 1997: 90). Based on an autobiographical screenplay by Gégauff, *Une partie de plaisir* details the break-up of an apparently happy family. Raw and traumatic in its realism (brought home by Chabrol's decision to have Gégauff, his ex-wife, and their little daughter all play their fictional selves – in their own house!), the film is also telling in its symbolism: a working-through of Chabrol's fears about Gégauff's destructive potential. Although at times fascinating and impressive – entertaining his guests, discoursing on art and philosophy, arguing brilliantly with hippies¹⁸ – the fictional Gégauff is also repulsive (he is equated at one point with a spider attacking its prey). Like an intimate version of the right-wing patriarchs from certain Chabrol films, Gégauff's character is autocratic and manipulative: he uses his daughter and patronises, humiliates and assaults his wife, finally appearing to kill her. It is in fact Chabrol's own ideal – the family – that is threatened by Gégauff (fictional and real). (Chabrol tends to make a distinction between the bourgeois family – which he considers a valid target for Gégauff and his alter egos – and the 'real' non-bourgeois, family – which he idealises.) On screen, Gégauff ends up in prison. Off screen, he began to drink more and more heavily, and gradually ceased to work with Chabrol. His last scenario for the latter was a television adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe in 1981. In late 1983, Gégauff rang Chabrol to say that after spending Christmas in Norway, he hoped to collaborate on a film project once more. On Christmas Eve, his young Norwegian wife stabbed him to death.

Chabrol's frequenting of film clubs in his youth opened him up to a less controversial but equally crucial influence: the cinema

17 'He fascinated me by pushing at the limits of self-destruction, by his taste for extraordinary paradoxes and his real elegance. But he also showed me just how far this could take him into self-destruction'

18 Compare the attacks on pseudo-intellectualism and Eastern religions that Chabrol makes in *Les Biches*, *Que la bête meure* and *Le Boucher*.

of Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock. It was Lang's *The Testament of Or Mabuse*, made in 1933 and seen by Chabrol in Paris after the war, that inspired him to become a film-maker. Lang has remained one of Chabrol's heroes, and in 1976 he dedicated *Alice ou la dernière fugue* to the dying German director. What Chabrol learned from Lang's cinema was the use of dispassionate, objective camera work to evoke the theme of fate, and the importance of expressionist *mise en scène* – in other words, the manipulation of decor and objects to convey atmosphere and meaning. As Chabrol explains, in Lang's expressionism 'On devrait comprendre de quoi il s'agit, même s'il y avait une chaise à la place de l'acteur'¹⁹ (Chabrol 1976:120). In contrast with Lang, Hitchcock uses the subjective camera (the point-of-view shot) to realise the more intimate themes of voyeurism, guilt and innocence, and to generate a complicity between the spectator and the narrative: 'Par principe, par définition, il n'y a chez Lang aucune subjectivité, alors que chez Hitchcock, dès les premiers films réalisés en Amérique, presque tous les plans sont faits du point de vue d'un personnage, tantôt l'un, tantôt l'autre, puis intervient l'objectivité, c'est-à-dire la subjectivité du spectateur'²⁰ (*ibid.*: 133-4). Like Lang, however, Hitchcock has been a recurrent influence on Chabrol's thinking about cinema, from the book on Hitchcock that he co-wrote with Eric Rohmer in 1957 to the use of subjective camera and voyeurism in his own work. The influences of Lang and Hitchcock are especially recognisable in certain films and in certain periods of Chabrol's career. Hence the Langian style of *Les Biches*, *Que la bête meure* and the films of the 1970s, and also of *Dr M* in 1989 (in some ways a remake of Lang's *Mabuse* series). While the 1960s thrillers *L'Œil du malin* and *La Femme infidèle* both owe a clear debt to Hitchcock, Chabrol's main Hitchcockian period dates from 1986 and *Masques*, a film littered with seventeen

19 'You should be able to understand what it's all about even if the actor was replaced by a chair'

20 On principle, by definition, there is no subjectivity in Lang, while in Hitchcock, from his first American films onwards, almost every shot is filmed from the point of view of one character or another. Then objectivity – that's to say, the spectator's subjectivity – intervenes'

references to the 'Master of Suspense'.²¹ By 1995 and *La Cérémonie*, Chabrol could declare: 'A un moment j'étais très langien ... Je crois qu'avec l'âge on devient hitchcockien'²² (Guérin and Jousse 1995: 30). However, Chabrol's understanding of Lang and Hitchcock most frequently results in a productive tension between their two legacies – between expressionism and voyeurism, objective camera and subjective camera, fate and personal responsibility.

Probably the most important lesson that Chabrol learned from the example of Lang and Hitchcock was that a film-maker's personal vision need not be incompatible with the demands of genre cinema. Lang and Hitchcock worked throughout their careers in popular genres, predominantly the thriller, but also the western and the fantasy film (Lang), the comedy and the melodrama (Hitchcock). Ironically, and cruelly for Chabrol, while in the 1950s the critics on *Cahiers du cinéma* (himself included) were able to reassess Lang and Hitchcock's artistic status by observing that a great *auteur* could work within genre cinema, in the 1960s this point seemed to be forgotten in the widespread condemnation (led by *Cahiers*) of Chabrol's fall from artistic grace into the spy film and the popular thriller. This irony is also symptomatic of Chabrol's general relationship with the new wave – a movement which he helped to create, and which was quick to reject him – as we shall see in the next chapter.

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21 These include references to North by North-West (the first glimpse of Townsend/ Legagneur's house), and Psycho (the body in the car boot).

22 'At a certain point, I was very Langian. I believe that one becomes Hitchcockian with age'