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Catherine Dousteysier-Khoze, *Claude Chabrol's Aesthetics of Opacity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 200 pp. 10 b+w illustrations. Bibliography, filmography, index. £75.00 (hb). ISBN 9780748692606; £19.99 (pb). ISBN 9781474431866; £19.99 (eb). ISBN 9780748692620.

Review by Isabelle Vanderschelden, Manchester Metropolitan University.

A recent British Film Institute article entitled “Where to begin with Claude Chabrol” captures the complexity of Claude Chabrol (1932-2010) and the challenges facing scholars who set out to analyse his filmography and legacy[1]. Historians associate him primarily with the young critics and directors revealed by the New Wave in the 1960s, but his prolific and eclectic career spanned over fifty years and fifty-four feature films. A fervent cinephile, Chabrol started as one of the core writers on *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s, with François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette and Jean-Luc Godard. Like them, he revered the work of Jean Renoir, Fritz Lang, Howard Hawks, and especially Hitchcock—he even co-wrote, with Rohmer, the first French study of Hitchcock in 1957 [2]. He also defended the *politique des auteurs*, also known as “auteur theory” in English, before becoming a self-proclaimed *auteur*, placing *mise-en-scène* at the centre of his filmmaking process.

Catherine Dousteysier-Khoze’s monograph proposes a comprehensive investigation of Chabrol’s filmography from 1958 to 2009. This means that her book will, above all, be of interest to French film enthusiasts and students of French cinema, but will also appeal to those interested in cultural and aesthetic debates. Even though she is careful to introduce the films that she discusses—I have noted detailed analyses of twenty-six of them—it is probably better to have some familiarity with Chabrol’s filmography to appreciate fully her critical journey into his work. A Francophone studies professor at Durham University and a specialist of nineteenth-century French literature and French cinema, she focuses on Chabrol’s aesthetic approach and influences rather than on his films’ production methods or his critical writings, though she regularly goes back to his statements and interviews to support her own analyses. The book thus complements previous critical studies of the director published in French and English, which have, to date, often discussed Chabrol’s contribution to the thriller genre, personal thematic motifs and taste for satirical social commentary.[3] Published at different stages of his career, these studies are therefore more restricted in scope and periods covered. For example, while Guy Austin’s insightful *Claude Chabrol*[4] extends as far as 1997, *Claude Chabrol's Aesthetics of Opacity* engages with more recent films, which have been less discussed so far. It brings together the experimental early films of the New Wave, the classic thrillers of the “Hélène cycle” (late 1960s-mid 1970s)

which became one of his trademarks, the films produced from 1985 in association with Marin Karmitz, which signalled Chabrol's return to success, and the films made after 2000.

Dousteysier-Khoze's approach is primarily organised around six thematic chapters and critical approaches: she revisits literary and artistic intertextual influences and Chabrol's appropriation of thriller and crime genre conventions in chapters one and two. She considers Chabrolean characterisation from the perspectives of the "human beasts" and the female killers in chapter three. She offers fresh interpretations of family secret narratives as recurrent motifs in chapter four. She then discusses the use of spaces as heterotopia in chapter five, before ending with Chabrol's ambivalent *mise-en-scène* using mirrors, *trompe-l'œil* and the Deleuzian "crystal image" in chapter six. She does not only reassess some key films, such as the subversive *Les Bonnes Femmes* (1962), classic masterpieces *Le Boucher* (1970) and, more briefly, *Les Biches* (1967) and *La Cérémonie* (1995), which have already attracted a lot of critical interest elsewhere. She also brings into the discussion underrated or lesser-known films spanning Chabrol's career, such as *Landru* (1962), *Juste avant la nuit* (1971) or *Masques* (1986).

The author aptly formulates significant thematic and stylistic synergies within Chabrol's extensive corpus, often regarded as displaying eclectic diversity and being of uneven quality. She thus starts from the premise that each Chabrol film creates pieces of a puzzle relevant to his entire filmography. She goes on to base her argument on the dichotomies of truth/illusion and actual/virtual that she relates to Balzac's idea that "the true artist looks for the truth behind the façade" (p. 30). She also relies on Chabrol's appropriation, as early as 1976 [5] of another Balzacian metaphor, the notion of "artistic *œuvre* as a mosaic" (p. 31), whereby "nothing in the world is all of a piece, everything is mosaic." [6] The mosaic metaphor allows Dousteysier-Khoze to engage with Chabrol's *auteurist* approach to filmmaking and reassess the recurring motifs in his filmography—monstrosity, unexplained evil and deceptive appearances—while reaffirming the coherence of his legacy. This is all the more relevant as Dousteysier-Khoze also underlines many intertextual literary references to Balzac's *Human Comedy* and his transformation of reality into myths (p.108). In addition, she points out other references to Zola's naturalism and his dysfunctional families marked by heredity, to Maupassant's use of spaces, and even to Mérimée's statues or Magritte's *trompe l'œil* effects.

If there is a critical consensus that Chabrol's two debut films, *Le Beau Serge* and *Les Cousins*, had launched the French New Wave in 1958, embracing new ways of producing and shooting films more independently, the reception of many films made during the 1960s up to *Les Biches* in 1967 was far less favourable. From the late 1960s, however, he established his authorial signature, reinventing the French thriller genre, pursuing relentlessly, in his own reflexive, subversive and ironic tone, his investigation of evil and deception, and creating killer figures, mostly within the setting of bourgeois, provincial, dysfunctional families. His films are seen as enriching the French thriller genre, and the author confirms this legacy by identifying "Chabrolean thrillers" made by other directors such as Anne Fontaine or Denis Dercourt (pp. 65-67). She shows that there is a lot more to his appropriations of film noir and thriller codes and to his deceptive plots than first meets the eye, and I would tend to support her assessment that Chabrol uses the "alibi of genre" to study the "human concept of normality" (p. 44).

As we have mentioned, Dousteysier-Khoze combines her expertise in nineteenth-century literature and her interest in film aesthetics to reappraise Chabrol's engagement with the thriller genre conventions. Her thorough demonstration of what his characters and stories owe to

Balzac—a feature shared with other New Wave directors including Rohmer, Truffaut and Rivette—helps to approach his aesthetic practice as opaque and reflexive, playing with deceptive appearances, secrets and inexplicable evil. For example, his attraction to monstrous serial killers, whom she renames “human beasts,” is a direct reference to Zola’s novel *La Bête humaine* and Renoir’s poetic realist adaptation of 1938 (p. 72). In *Le Boucher*, the serial killer plot thus reveals an exemplary investigation into “what being human means” (p. 44). This film serves as starting point for Dousteysier-Khoze’s thematic, generic and aesthetic reappraisals of the way in which Chabrol’s *mise-en-scène* represents opaquely his male protagonists—and, after 1990, increasingly female killer characters. Resisting psychological explanation, these protagonists are at the centre of Chabrol’s inquiry into reality and illusion, truth and appearance. In *Violette Nozières* (1978), for example, the female protagonist is presented ambiguously as a beast and a martyr.

Moving on to discuss other narrative features of the films, Dousteysier-Khoze draws in chapter five on Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, the juxtaposition of several spaces that are incompatible in a real place, creating “a space of illusion” and “other spaces” [7] to account for Chabrol’s opaque representation of reality (p. 118), a motif that runs through his entire filmography. She shows how the illusory time-space of many films, unstable and over-coded, forms the basis for opacity, creating conflict within images between reality and illusion. This section is based on a range of films: some from the 1970s (*La Rupture* (1971), *Violette Nozières*) and others from after 2000 (*La Fleur du mal* (2002) and *La Demoiselle d’honneur* (2004)) to support the argument and confirm the coherent continuity of Chabrol’s work. In her last chapter, which rounds up successfully the demonstration of reflexive opacity and overall coherence of Chabrol’s *oeuvre*, she makes use of Deleuze’s concept of the “crystal image” [8] to revisit the metaphor of the double suggested in the title of *La Fille coupée en deux* (2007), one of the detailed case studies in this chapter, together with *L’Enfer* (1994). This chapter conclusively demonstrates how Chabrol, in film after film, challenges realistic representations by introducing distance through a series of cinematic strategies, including reflexive spectacle and theatricality, through mirrors, *trompe-l’œil* and *mises en abyme*.

In chapters five and six, the author enriches her deconstruction and analysis of opacity in film representation—in Chabrol’s case, the incessant blurring of reality and illusion. Her conceptualisation of the aesthetics of opacity often goes back to *Le Boucher*, which reappears throughout the book as one of the key films, but also extends convincingly to more abstract interpretations, fully embracing Chabrol’s late career films: *Au Coeur du mensonge* (1998), and last two films, *La Fille coupée en deux* and *Bellamy* (2009). The author re-habilitates these sometimes underrated later films as key to understanding Chabrol’s attraction for opacity, confirming the construction of a coherent *oeuvre* right to the end of his life. She thus reconciles the auteurist approaches linked to the New Wave legacy, which have often been challenged in film studies at the end of the twentieth century, broader aesthetic questions of cinematic spectacle, and more philosophical considerations such as processes of fragmentation and fluid, playful relationships between illusion and reality, enriched by Foucault and Deleuze-inspired readings of the films.

Even if she tends to leave aside some facets of Chabrol’s cinematic persona such as his taste for social satire, the artistic distance created by his ironic gaze, and his close relationship with his actors, Dousteysier-Khoze’s innovative approach is welcome because it is up-to-date and interdisciplinary. She demonstrates effectively that his cinema gains in depth and significance by being examined as a whole through the prisms of mirrors, opacity of images and fragmented spectacle, which are all recurring manifestations of the mosaic effect of the *oeuvre*. This book is

therefore a valuable addition to cultural debates and film studies, confirming the coherence of Chabrol's reflexive aesthetics, reworking of intertextual influences and genre conventions. It offers new, insightful reappraisals of a filmmaker who has, possibly, not always been taken as seriously as some of his New Wave peers in his lifetime, but whose impact on, and legacy for world cinema aesthetics and philosophy are still to be fully evaluated.

NOTES

[1] <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/where-begin-claude-chabrol> (last accessed 20 July 2020)

[2] Éric Rohmer et Claude Chabrol, *Hitchcock* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1957).

[3] Even if Chabrol was largely overlooked by *Cahiers du cinéma* critics between 1962 and 1985, they produced a "Claude Chabrol" special issue in 1997 at the time of his fiftieth film. Several *auteurist* studies on Chabrol were published in French: in the 1980s, Joël Magny's *Claude Chabrol* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1987) and Christian Blanchet's *Claude Chabrol* (Paris: Rivages, 1989) focused on early films. Two more volumes appeared after 2000: Alexandre Wilfried's *La Traversée des apparences* (Paris: Editions du Félin, 2003) and Michel Pascal's *Claude Chabrol* (Paris: Editions de la Martinière, 2012).

[4] Guy Austin, *Claude Chabrol* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

[5] Claude Chabrol, *Et pourtant, je tourne...* (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1976).

[6] Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres" [1967], *Architectures, mouvement continuité*, 5 (1984): 46-49.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1985).

Isabelle Vanderschelden
Manchester Metropolitan University
i.vanderschelden@mmu.ac.uk

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