

Regarding Isabelle Huppert

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Yesterday as I reread Hubert Hoskin's translation of C. A. van Peursen's *Leibniz* (1966/69), I couldn't help but think of Isabelle Huppert. As with Leibniz, experience alone cannot account for her performances, but I don't think, regarding Isabelle Huppert, I need concern myself with eternal truths residing in the mind of God. Judge advocate, nun, prostitute, mother, dressmaker, postal clerk, piano teacher, scientist, abortionist, war bride, writer, hostage, thief—whatever the role or source (Euripides, Diderot, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Maupassant, Conrad, James, Zamyatin, Crnjanski, Genet, Bataille, Duras, Highsmith, Bachmann, Rendell, Jim Thompson), energies feed the performances of Isabelle Huppert from without and within.

Have you seen many of her over one hundred films? *Retour à la bien-aimée*, for example, or *Eaux profondes*, *Pas de scandale*, *Sans queue ni tête*, *La séparation*? Are you older or younger than Isabelle Huppert?

At the door to the house of Isabelle Huppert one stands as if before a tabernacle of dreams. Have you, too, stood before the tabernacle of Isabelle Huppert, or perhaps even entered its elegant chambers, which others before and after you have also entered? I confess I have not, though I am convinced I can say without equivocation that the house of Isabelle Huppert is capacious, albeit modestly so.

As with Bachelard (according to Barthes), dream-reading sometimes overwhelms me when I hit Pause and imagine Huppert as guide in a documentary on Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*, as Breton's Nadja, as Mrs. Chilvers in James's "The Great Condition" . . .

Even if she is French, no theory of the body can attach itself to Isabelle

Huppert.¹ Only Henry James, on whom theory also finds little or no purchase, could capture her in words. Is her remarking that one doesn't play "characters, one plays states of mind" not Jamesian in every sense? Writers have praised her intelligence; even more have explored the psychology (abjection, power, apotheosis, glory) of her body. And why not, considering we've seen her body's filmed representation make love and be made love to, seen it cinematically assaulted and raped, seen the tubercular Alphonsine Plessis of *La Dame aux camélias* shed her clothes with stoic indifference and descend the stairs to her lover's waiting friends.

In the house of Isabelle Huppert one finds the usual domestic appurtenances, along with personal items I have no business cataloging, among them her husband and children, the latter mostly grown now and with careers of their own. The personal items of Isabelle Huppert are of interest, no doubt, but they are not her performances.

If ever there was a metaphysical face, it's the face of Isabelle Huppert, I say to myself as I wander the streets of her films, whether in Portugal or Paris, Korea or the Philippines, a face, as Elfriede Jelinek has written, "made to be penetrated," and at the same time impenetrable.

Have you remarked her tongue's sometimes spontaneous, sometimes calculated protrusion from its private recesses into the open² in such films as *La cérémonie*, *La vie moderne*, *La fausse suivante*, *Medée*, *Les affinités électives*, *Malina*, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* . . . ? In *Madame Baptiste* teenaged Blanche, wearing a pale blue frock, rushes down the stairs past her observant mother and father, her tongue escaping, so to speak, its confines before the girl herself can hers. Later, having in the meantime been violated and impregnated by a stable hand, Blanche, foregrounded, is seen sewing, while behind her, her two girlfriends, who've ostensibly come to visit her, put on airs. Blanche pauses, listening to their insulting chatter, then slowly, thoughtfully, slides out her tongue. A few minutes later, after she's cut the hat of one of the girls to shreds and her friends have exited in a huff, she pulls the thread across her lips, looks up, and slowly, meditatively, runs it over her tongue. Another early example: in *La dentellière (The Lacemaker)* the morning after Béatrice loses her virginity, her lover whispers something in her ear while they're drying off on the beach

¹ "A great film is always a metaphor for the direction," Huppert has said, aligning herself with her directors and auteur theory, which in fact is practice, not theory. See also the issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* (No. 477 March 1994) she guest-edited.

² "It's not a public matter for me, being an actress—it's a really private matter. Most of the time that's what cinema is. It's public, it's private [. . .] The rest belongs to me." —Isabelle Huppert

after an early morning swim. Huppert's pointed, uplifted tongue pops out, then wiggles back and forth, before she in return whispers something to him. Even in *Abfallprodukte der Liebe*, a documentary in which she interviews the opera singer Maria Mödl, her tongue swiftly darts in and out in anticipation of Frau Mödl's response to Huppert's request for a private lesson. What a mobile, multipurpose, expressive instrument is her tongue! What power in intimacy! When thought merges with tongue in the films of Isabelle Huppert, Descartes' dualism dissolves.

It is at these moments, in order not to lose myself entirely (I confess the study of Isabelle Huppert presents as many dangers as pleasures, as perhaps some of her roles do for her, though I'm sure she's more professional about these matters than I am), that I consider the parametrics of Isabelle Huppert—the ratio of close-ups to medium and long shots, of right profile to left profile, longest take without blinking, the direction of her movements across the frame, her placement in the frame, her relative size, e.g., whether or not she's in heels (she often is), her hair style, makeup, the kind of film where her freckles are most often hidden, her gestures, the angle of her head, her rhythms, hesitations, intonations ...

Surely there come times at work when she, too, is no longer conscious of what she is doing or has done.

Seldom are the films of Isabelle Huppert shown in the house of Isabelle Huppert, though in every cranny her trace lingers, as it does in every frame of every film in which she has appeared. Parisian sunlight shines on the rugs and parquet of her house, as has, over the decades, moonlight. And then days go by when no sunlight enters; clouds hang like wine sacks low over the city, obscuring the upper half of the Eiffel Tower, which I could see one year out of the window of an attic room on rue de l'Université where I lived with Claire from Madison, who was studying French at the ACP. At the moment I can't recall any scenes where Isabelle Huppert is filmed in front of or alongside or on the tower, this monument to *homo ludens* and communication, though I'm sure she has been. The likelihood of her making a conscious choice never to be seen in the same frame as the Eiffel Tower is not high, but that I have simply forgotten it is quite likely.³

If you had the chance to see only one room in her house, which one would it be: living room? dining room? bathroom? bedroom? guest room? kitchen?

³ In *La ritournelle* (2014), for one example, the Eiffel Tower is seen in the distance behind Huppert in a sight-seeing boat on the Seine.

For various reasons my preference would be the study. In the study of Isabelle Huppert there are paintings, photographs, scripts, plays, novels, notebooks, bills, notions, plants, perhaps a knick-knack or two. Or perhaps the room is spare, austere, without even a mirror.

Is it despite or because of certain roles she has played as mothers (*Ma mère*, *My Little Princess*, *L'amore nascoto*, *Medée* . . .), in which her characters' parental skills are, let us say, wanting, that in Isabelle Huppert herself, the person not the performer, I sense, with a believer's gay abandon, motherhood at its most sublime?

I imagine a dark green room without window or door, lit from below. Shadows stack themselves, one upon another, in the corner. A motion in the air, a slight disturbance in the water in the glass on a table in the room without window or door in the dream of a woman (Isabelle Huppert) with her head in her arms. Other shadows on the ceiling come and go, in sync with the sound of traffic and rain. The room expands, contracts, expands, or is it that the eyes of the viewers are dilating? Next morning my cabriolet pulls up at the market and I see her begging at the flower stall. "You again, wicked enchantress," I cry. "What have you done with your deadly box?" "For you," she replies, her eyes sparkling as only the cinematic eyes of Isabelle Huppert can, "I've filled it with the most delicate toys from Nuremburg. Won't you let me show them to you in your carriage?" I signal my driver to hurry on. "Wait," she shouts, running after me, "tell me where you've hidden the heavenly fire you stole." *O Jupiter, when will these torments end?* And now outside the room without window or door in the dream of the woman at the table with her head in her arms, someone knocks. Mouse shadows rustle across the wooden floor . . .

That's as far as I've gotten. But who would I have play Nerval opposite Huppert's Pandora in this loose adaptation of Nerval's eponymous tale?

Often in her house, when not on location, her figure may be seen, whether reflected or not. In Bellocchio's *Bella addormentata* the famous actress she plays always glances into the mirrors she passes. But the characters Isabelle Huppert portrays are one thing, the actress herself another. And then, how often do you look at yourself in shop windows? As often as Isabelle Huppert? Less often? More?

Although she dismisses any designation of actors as artists, I would like to say that in the art of Isabelle Huppert,⁴ the parametric at times becomes metaphysical.

⁴ "((A multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in every direction.))"
Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe

For Douglas Sirk, too old to have worked with the international star, “The surface isn’t really the surface, but rather a manifestation of the depths.”

May I paraphrase Wittgenstein and say that there come moments in the performances of Isabelle Huppert when she *believes* she is pretending?

I begin a screenplay, “The Woman from the Suburbs,” an Argento-like descent into a dark, wintry Paris, the plot a nightmare of betrayals, starring Huppert as Katrin, who, having been betrayed at age 60 by her husband, Gabriel, a philanderer and banker, and almost seduced by Angelo, her stepdaughter’s lover, is framed for Angelo’s murder. Katrin waking up from being drugged, clothes ashamble, cops banging on the door, her running into the night, stripping herself in an alley of all identifying items—cell phone, credit cards, photos of her husband and treacherous stepdaughter . . .

Months streaming nothing but films with Huppert, searching the Web for interviews with her in Frankfurt, Cannes, Stockholm, Locarno, Marrakech, Rome . . .

In this dream a woman who is not Isabelle Huppert is showing me through the house, but even as she speaks in a French I find easy to understand, I’m aware that this isn’t really the house of Madame Huppert, that at none of the floor-to-ceiling windows we pass has she ever stood, coffee cup in hand, gazing down upon her arrondissement, that the gray Siamese turning each corner ahead of us does not belong to the actress, that the musty stairs we are ascending are from a Naruse film, not a film with Huppert. Then suddenly I’m standing on the street again looking up at her windows, thinking I am no longer dreaming, though in reality I am.