



La Femme infidèle The Unfaithful Wife

Director: Claude Chabrol

Production Companies: Films la Boétie, Cinégai

Producer: André Génovès

Production Managers: Georges Casati,
Alain Belmondo

Assistant Directors: Jacques Fansten,
Jean-François Detré

Script Supervisor: Claudine Gaubert

Screenplay: Claude Chabrol

Director of Photography: Jean Rabier

Camera Operator: Claude Zidi

Editor: Jacques Gaillard

Art Director: Guy Littaye

Music: Pierre Jansen

Singer: Dominique Zardi

Music Director: André Girard

Sound: Guy Chichignoud

Cast:

Stéphane Audran (*Hélène Desvallées*)

Michel Bouquet (*Charles Desvallées*)

Maurice Ronet (*Victor Pégala*)

Serge Bento (*Bignon*)

Michel Duchaussoy (*Police Officer Duval*)

Guy Marly (*Police Officer Gobet*)

Stéphane Di Napoli (*Michel*)

Louise Chevalier (*maid*)

Louise Rioton (*Charles' mother*)

Henri Marteau (*Paul*)

François Moro-Giafferi (*Frédéric*)

Dominique Zardi (*truck driver*)

Michel Charrel (*policeman*)

Henri Attal (*man in café*)

Jean-Marie Arnoux (*false witness*)

Donatella Turri (*Brigitte, the secretary*)

France-Italy 1969

99 mins

Digital (restoration)

A BFI re-release

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Re-releases

La Femme infidèle

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Just after he had finished *La Femme infidèle*, Claude Chabrol said in a television interview that he always made films about the bourgeoisie because that was the class he knew best. And the reason for that was simple: 'I am one of them,' he went on, 'I am one myself – *but I don't like them.*'

He's talking about a class of Frenchmen we should judge as somewhere between comfortably-off and rich. He's fascinated by their high degree of social organisation. It might be supposed that the organisation was designed to protect their position, as a defence of power, or status, or to ensure various kinds of immunity. But on the whole Chabrol seems inclined to view it as a defence against the unexpected, against indignity, and against passion. In this aspect, *La Femme infidèle*, set as it is in a mansion in Versailles, inescapably presents a picture of an *ancien régime*. It is as though Chabrol had decided that the barriers that crashed in 1789 were the most superficial ones: economic, political, social. Beneath them the emotional rites which sustained the *haute bourgeoisie* – refined or calcified according to your taste – clicked on unperturbed, even in the arriviste. *La Femme infidèle* is about the irruption into this ritual not so much of passion itself, as of the evidence of passion, the awareness of passion, above all the threatening acknowledgment of passion.

At first sight it looks as if the film is about modern marriage. There is a husband, 40-year-old Charles Desvallées, a genial insurance broker, putting on a little weight. There is a wife, Hélène, younger, beautiful, very much a successful man's possession. There is a bright 10-year-old son without whom they apparently could not live, though it is not simply that he is holding them together. They appear to love one another. At the same time there is an unspecified sexual trouble which drives her into a satisfying affair with a handsome divorced writer of her own age (Pégala). Desvallées finds out and kills Pégala without telling her. Discovering his crime with something like pride, Hélène will say nothing either to him or to the investigating police. Their mutual love is strengthened.

The marks of ritual are beautifully recorded. The long, slow left-to-right pans bringing the car to the side of the house and Desvallées across its frontage, the patient and smooth attention of the camera as Desvallées and his wife take tea on the lawn, look at snapshots, enjoy the sunshine. The perfect familiarity of the almost silent evening meal, built up in close-shots until a wider angle establishes the symmetry of husband, child and wife. Hélène preceding Desvallées into the sitting-room for coffee with a proprietorial backward glance which tacitly establishes her expectation that he will be following. These and a thousand similar details are exact and telling.

What's even more impressive is the manner in which Chabrol controls the pace. A great deal of the film passes in watching movement, not always purposeless, but often inconsequential. The interest lies in the degree of haste, the familiarity of the movement, its utility or pointlessness. Desvallées is steady-paced, his small purposes served by careful, economic movement, the camera following him with unemotional, unironic attention as he proceeds from telephone to cigarette packet to car-parking disc to record player. Hélène is more languid, more mysterious, her secret purposes hinted at by long slow

Claude Chabrol: Elements of Crime

Le Beau Serge

Thu 3 Sep 21:00; Sun 20 Sep 15:15 (+ intro by academic Catherine Dousteyssier-Khoze)

La Rupture

Fri 4 Sep 18:10; Sat 19 Sep 12:20; Sat 3 Oct 12:10

À double tour

Web of Passion
Sat 5 Sep 14:30; Sat 19 Sep 14:50

The Third Lover

L'oeil du malin
Sat 5 Sep 18:20; Sat 19 Sep 20:45

The Beast Must Die

Que la bête meure
Sat 5 Sep 20:20; Thu 17 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by critic, lecturer and programmer Geoff Andrew);
Sun 4 Oct 18:10

Les Biches

Sun 6 Sep 18:30; Wed 23 Sep 20:40;

Sun 27 Sep 15:00; Mon 5 Oct 14:30

Juste avant la nuit

Just before Nightfall
Tue 8 Sep 20:45; Sun 27 Sep 12:10; Fri 2 Oct 14:30

Le Boucher

Wed 9 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by season curator Catherine Wheatley); Mon 21 Sep 20:50;
Fri 25 Sep 20:45; Sun 4 Oct 12:20; Tue 6 Oct 14:30

Philosophical Screens: Le Boucher

Wed 9 Sep 20:10 Blue Room

Wedding in Blood

Les noces rouges
Thu 10 Sep 18:10; Tue 15 Sep 21:00;

Tue 29 Sep 18:20

Ten Days' Wonder

La décade prodigieuse
Thu 10 Sep 20:30 (+ intro by season curator Catherine Wheatley); Sat 19 Sep 18:10

La Femme infidèle

The Unfaithful Wife
From Fri 11 Sep (Preview screening on Tue 1 Sep 20:30)

Violette Nozière

Sun 20 Sep 18:00 (+ intro by academic Catherine Dousteyssier-Khoze); Wed 30 Sep 20:30

The Hatter's Ghost

Les fantômes du chapelier
Tue 22 Sep 18:00; Mon 28 Sep 20:35

The Cry of the Owl

Le cri du hibou
Tue 22 Sep 20:55; Mon 28 Sep 18:00

Mean Girls: Claude Chabrol's Dangerous Women

Wed 23 Sep 18:15

The Swindle

Rien ne va plus
Fri 25 Sep 18:15; Sat 3 Oct 18:15 (+ intro by Claude Chabrol's daughter and collaborator Cécile Maistre-Chabrol)

The Colour of Lies

Au coeur du mensonge
Sat 26 Sep 15:00; Sun 4 Oct 15:10

Story of Women

Une affaire de femmes
Sat 26 Sep 17:50; Thu 1 Oct 20:30

La Cérémonie

Thu 1 Oct 18:00 (+ extended intro on queer Chabrol by academic Kit Francis Bradbury Rance);
Tue 6 Oct 20:45

The Bridesmaid

La demoiselle d'honneur
Sat 3 Oct 15:10; Mon 5 Oct 20:40 (+ intro by season curator Catherine Wheatley)

The Girl Cut in Two

La fille coupée en deux
Sat 3 Oct 20:40; Tue 6 Oct 18:00 (+ Q&A with Claude Chabrol's daughter and collaborator Cécile Maistre-Chabrol)

With thanks to

Tamasa Distribution

The BFI will be releasing a selection of Claude Chabrol's films on Blu-ray and DVD in 2027

tracks – in which close her off from her surroundings, isolating her narcissism, her passion or her grief. With Pégala gone, she shuts herself in her bedroom and, standing at the foot of the bed, lowers herself backwards on to it, her limbs dead, the only sound a wordless gasp of hurt which the camera has to lean over her to hear.

Pégala is brisker, uneasy, his movements unresolved. On the bed with Hélène he drops the lid of the teapot. In his embarrassing (and fatal) meeting with Desvallées his hands and eyes are everywhere, protesting, assuaging, confessing, ingratiating. It is clear that glamorous, independent Pégala is not of the stuff to survive. When Desvallées kills him we are at first as astonished as the murderer is by the revelation of that secret strength, not merely physical. But we recognise that the core of subterranean violence is not only held in check, but husbanded, by a skin of civilisation which perhaps generations of Desvallées had worked hard to preserve. The excuse Hélène gives for driving into Paris to see her lover is that she wants to have her skin cleaned. She can do little about what's underneath it. Desvallées' violence is suddenly shocking because it is in contrast to his habitual economy of effort, and the power of the sequence in which he disposes of the body is proportionate to that economy. For here he turns himself with great efficiency into a work-machine and, mopping blood, wrapping, dragging, heaving, driving the body of Pégala, he is sustained as always by the rituals of habit and the pull towards normality which govern his life.

The most stunning images in the film are here and at the end. The first is of Desvallées' face against a blank sky, taut with effort and concentration, lifted out of time and place, bearing the burden of his dead enemy to be swallowed up in a featureless, primeval swamp. The police are persistent but their purposes now seem trivial. At the end, with symmetry re-established, the final shot unites a physically separated family. Desvallées, about to be taken off for further questioning, looks back up the drive at his wife and son, posed together like a snapshot under the trees. The camera begins to track slowly from left to right, the movement associated with him, and in the same moment, for her, closes in towards Hélène through the leaves, this time not to isolate, but to preserve.

What has Chabrol demonstrated? That despite appearances – everything in Chabrol is despite those – the heights and depths of emotion can be visited and returned from safely? – or encompassed and assimilated? – or encountered and avoided? – paradoxically by cleaving to just these restrictive forms of life? Chabrol doesn't like the bourgeoisie, but we doubt whether he is more fascinated or repelled by this artificial skin of behaviour. Are the heights scaled, as it were, or skirted, after all? Doesn't he admire, despite himself, the sophistication of this fighting unit, and their ability to survive? When Desvallées confesses to Hélène, 'Je t'aime comme un fou,' is he preserving an invaluable relationship or (the bourgeois sin) a priceless possession? At any rate this sure-footed, finely acted and spellbinding film is not ruffled, but deepened, by that ambivalence.

Gavin Millar, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1969