

Film REVIEWS



'Ten Days' Wonder': Anthony Perkins, Marlène Jobert, Michel Piccoli

Ten Days' Wonder

In their novel *Ten Days' Wonder*, the cousins who write as Ellery Queen produced what they described as a 'Decalogical Detective Story'. In it, their detective hero—also called Ellery Queen—is visited by a young sculptor who, since his adoptive father's marriage, has been suffering regularly from attacks of amnesia. Queen agrees to watch over the young man on his 'father's' estate, happy to work on his latest novel while the sculptor chisels away at his statues of the classical gods. In the seven days which follow, during which the 'son' is told the name of his 'real' parents and violates their tomb in an amnesiac trance, Queen learns that the boy is being blackmailed over an indiscreet and fully reciprocated passion for his young stepmother. In a moment of inspiration he perceives that the sculptor is subconsciously violating all ten commandments in turn, but reaches this conclusion too late to prevent the stepmother's brutal murder. His explanation convinces the sculptor of his guilt and prompts him to hang himself. Only a year later does Queen realise that the 'clues' which led to his deductions were all masterminded by the vengeful father, the wife's real murderer, whom he now compels to take his own life.

In transposing the novel to the screen and the action from New England to Alsace, Chabrol has changed considerably more than the characters' names. It has become axiomatic that the thriller element in his films generally serves as a formal structure within which to explore the vagaries of the human heart. Yet this time, on one level at least, he abandons Hitchcock's preference for suspense over surprise, trailing

considerably more red herrings than the original novel before his disconcerted audience, while imposing on its human relationships a wilfully classical formalism. But where the Decalogue provided the Cousins Queen with little more than the basis for a not-so-intellectual puzzle, Chabrol spins it into the moral fabric of his *Ten Days' Wonder* (Hemdale), interweaving classical mythology, Old and New Testaments, Nietzschean speculation (and, of course, a wealth of cinematic cross-references) to produce what must surely rank as the screen's first theological thriller: a brilliant, and palpably physical, exegesis on comparative religion and original sin.

To begin with, he has made two crucial changes to the novel's plot. The detective has been promoted to a philosophy lecturer, Paul (Michel Piccoli), the author of a tome called *Absolute Justice*, who uses his enforced country retreat to complete a paper on inductive reasoning. A convinced atheist and rationalist, he was formerly the son Charles' professor, personally responsible for the boy's defection from the Catholic Church. Having, as he puts it, 'taken Charles' God away from him', his attitude towards Charles' literal adoration of his father is naturally a little ambivalent.

Secondly, Chabrol has imposed on the father an eccentricity which at first sight appears merely a film-maker's baroque indulgence. A man of limitless wealth, Théo has chosen not just the place but the time in which he lives out his days: the autumn of 1925 when, as a poor man, he arrived in America and began to build his empire. Add to the etymological significance of his name the fact that he has 'created' his son from a foundling left in the dust and fashioned his wife—originally his adopted daughter—in

the mould of his private dream, and one realises that Genesis provides a more likely key than Exodus to the ensuing mysteries.

The seemingly abstract post-credits montage, involving a good deal of stop-motion, in fact follows the Bible's first chapter up to the creation of the beasts of the field. At the end of the film's third day (the narrative is divided into ten neatly labelled chapters) Chabrol, like the Lord Himself, interposes a mysterious shot of a white moon shining from the firmament over the waters. While the adulterous tryst between Charles and his stepmother Hélène (Marlène Jobert) is twice recalled in an identical shot of the pair lying in almost chaste nakedness amid a vast expanse of verdant foliage. In the context of Théo's formal Eden, it is their nakedness rather than their sin which shocks us; and from the time we see the shot, it seems inevitable that Théo must cast them relentlessly from his fragile paradise.

But with Théo as God and Charles as his son, it is perhaps no less inevitable that Christian symbolism should also be invoked. The film's first day opens with a shot of Charles' hands, patterned with his own blood; the blackmailer marks the pay-off spot with twigs in the form of a cross; and the sculptor now dies impaled, in crucifixion pose and with spikes through his hands, on the family railings.

Yet even as Théo's mad mother, locked in the attic and seldom mentioned, swigs vintage Blood of Christ, Chabrol also contrives to invoke earlier mythologies: conjuring up the thunder, she is Cybele herself, mother of the Zeus whom Charles in his studio fashions in Théo's image. The legend of Oedipus is also doubly suggested: literally, through the situation of the foundling son who sleeps with his mother; and on the Freudian level, through Charles' tangled feelings for all five of his surrogate parents (Hélène, Théo, Paul himself, the farmer couple to whom Théo demonically ascribes his birth).

The film sustains and transcends this clutter of cultural cross-references largely because of the tension between its dense mythological content and its immaculate 'Hitchcockian' surface. There's a marvellous shot of Hélène racing across the town for her tryst with the mysterious blackmailer, a superb chase sequence involving two vintage cars on a pitch black country lane. Like Hitchcock, Chabrol also exploits his actors' accumulated histories to flesh out the reality of their archetypal roles. Orson Welles' monumental Théo ('You don't think a man of my size and weight wants to squat on the grass nibbling sandwiches?') fuses Kane's megalomania with the desire to turn myth to reality that destroyed the old man in *Immortal Story*. And after *Psycho*, who could help suspecting Anthony Perkins' Charles of every passing parricide?

For as in Hitchcock, Chabrol's in-jokes are often playfully misleading, providing, in fact, the major element of suspense. It is Welles' voice which introduces the narrative—as red a herring as the voice-over in *Sunset Boulevard*. The first day, through a series of crazily tilted shots and dizzying camera movements, implies that we shall be experiencing the ten days from Charles' point of view. Yet it is Paul's chain of false reasoning that we are compelled to follow thereafter.

But even when cheating, Chabrol plays fair by his own rules. As he told Rui Nogueira in a SIGHT AND SOUND interview: 'There's not only a Hélène in my films. There's always a Paul and a Charles as well. . . and Charles will never kill Paul.' This time Paul acknowledges his hubris, telling Théo, 'I'm as guilty as you are.' But when with his next breath he decrees, 'There's no place in this world for gods like you,' we understand that this time the transference of guilt is twofold. By ordering the death of God, the atheist has assumed His role.

Admittedly the film has some rough surfaces: in

poor post-synching on the (original) English language version, dialogue spoken in a disconcerting assortment of accents. But these same imperfections serve on many levels to reinforce the film's multi-level themes. The *trompe-l'oeil* effect of the opening shots, with Rabier's camera pulling diagonally back to reveal that what we have taken for the 'reality' of Charles in his hotel room is merely a looking-glass reflection, forms the first link in a chain whose every part proves to be not what it seems. As Paul steps off the Paris train, it is through his eyes that we first see Hélène: a Twenties heroine standing erect beside her Hispano. 'I didn't know Charles had a sister,' remarks the expert in inductive reasoning. 'I'm his mother,' she declares. But image, reasoning and statement are all three equally false. The sustained *trompe-l'oeil* effects are in fact constantly paralleled by what can only be described as *trompe-l'oreille* explanations (like the mythical genealogies), reinforced by the foreign formality with which most of the principals inflect their lines.

It is only fitting that Chabrol's God should provide the final judgment. In the film's (deliberately) most spellbinding moment, Théo holds his dinner guests enthralled with an apocryphal anecdote about a man who successfully devised a potion to remove a blemish from the body of his otherwise perfect wife. Shortly afterwards, the lady died. As the *raconteur* explains, 'The imperfection was life.'

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