

Document Citation

Title	Merci pour le chocolat
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Source	<i>Time Out New York</i>
Date	2002 Aug 01
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	77
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Merci pour le chocolat, Chabrol, Claude, 2000

Reviews

Merci pour le chocolat

Dir. Claude Chabrol. 2000. N/R. 99mins. In French, with subtitles. Isabelle Huppert, Jacques Dutronc, Anna Mouglalis, Rodolphe Pauly.

According to the "director's note of intent" included in the press kit, *Merci pour le chocolat*, Claude Chabrol's latest picture (arriving in New York nearly two full years after its premiere at the Venice Film Festival), was designed as a study in perversity. More perverse than the film's casually malevolent protagonist, however, is its willful disregard for genre convention. Loosely adapted from a novel by Charlotte Armstrong, *Merci* features the elegant surface and sleek contours of a domestic thriller, but Chabrol has no interest in putting the audience through the wringer. Every potential twist is telegraphed well in advance, every performance respectably muted; the movie seems to have been made under the influence of Rohypnol, the potent sedative that functions as its primary plot device.

Best known as "the date-rape drug," Rohypnol isn't legally available for pre-



SWEET REVENGE Huppert, left, offers some very special *chocolat* to Mouglalis.

scription in the U.S. In Europe, however, it's a common ingredient in sleeping pills, like those taken nightly by André Polonski (Dutronc), a celebrated concert pianist whose second wife, Lisbeth, was killed in an auto accident. (The autopsy, we learn early on, revealed that she was heavily sedated at the time of the crash.) Present on that occasion was Mika (Huppert), heir to a Swiss-chocolate dynasty, who had briefly been André's first wife. Years

later, as the film begins, André and Mika exchange vows once again; not long afterward, a lovely young pianist-in-training, Jeanne (Mouglalis), turns up at the family's home, bearing the news that she and Guillaume (Pauly), André's son by Lisbeth, may have been switched at birth. André takes a keen interest in this prodigy and possible relation, to the apparent irritation of both Mika and Guillaume. Say, would Jeanne like to try a cup of Mika's

famous hot chocolate?

Shot with Chabrol's customary precision, *Merci* holds your attention from moment to moment, but it also builds languorously to a conclusion as unsatisfyingly shrugworthy as any in recent memory. The patently predictable narrative isn't the problem—indeed, *predictable* isn't really the right word, since Chabrol and his co-writer, Caroline Eliacheff, basically come right out and tell you precisely what's going to happen. No, the problem is that Mika, who should arouse our curiosity and inspire commingled horror and pity, never amounts to much more than an abstract cipher, thanks to Huppert's bizarrely mannered and remote performance. Speaking every line in the same clipped, robotically cheerful tone, she signals Mika's malign intentions without providing so much as a glimpse of the character's soul, and her emotional opacity scuttles the film's attempt to function as a character study. Since it doesn't really work as a thriller, either, Chabrol's take on perversity ultimately feels less like a portrait than like a preliminary sketch—impressive, yes, but embryonic and incomplete. Thanks, but no thanks. (Now playing; Film Forum.)—Mike D'Angelo