

ELLE

Trauma and Perversion: What Does Triumph Have To Do With It?

By Sandra E. Cohen, Ph.D.

Sheila O'Malley, on rogerebert.com, says that Paul Verhoeven, *Elle's* director, "is interested in the psychology and behavior of this particular woman ... every interaction, not just sexual and political, contains small jostles for power, position, dominance." Mr. Verhoeven has called the film a "noir thriller," saying: "There's an enormous amount of ambiguity, gaps that are in the narrative on purpose for the audience to fill in." And, he adds that he didn't want to fill them in "in a Freudian way." That's what I'm here to do.

I'm interested in Michele Leblanc, too, played brilliantly by Isabelle Huppert. I think we all are. Especially since we see more than *small* jostles for power, position, and dominance in the disturbingly perverse game Michele plays out with Patrick (Laurent Laffitte). Yet, the deeper issue in the film isn't power or dominance over Patrick. It's about control over something else. What that "something else" is and what Michele's sadomasochism is about will be the focus of my discussion.

Elle begins with a brutal rape. As we enter the film, we're presented with an unsettling situation - not only a woman violently raped by a masked intruder who wipes his genitals, pulls up his pants, and casually walks out; but a woman who seems to have no response to the attack. Michele Leblanc lies on the floor, legs spread, in black dress and pumps, motionless; wine glasses and china broken around her. She gradually begins to move in a daze/almost a dance, while classical music plays.

In slow motion, she sweeps the broken pieces into a dustpan and goes into the bathroom. She draws a bubble bath, settles in, and without any obvious disturbance, pushes away the blood seeping to the surface; discoloring the virginally white foam. Still expressionless, Michele dries herself off and orders food - two pieces of hamachi sushi.

Why is Michele so apparently unfazed by the attack (systematically getting rid of reminders, even throwing out her dress), soldiering on as Robert (Christian Berkel), her best friend Anna's (Anne Consigny) husband and sometimes lover, puts it?

The rape scene is repeated several times in the film. Each subsequent time, we witness a woman fighting, not as cold and detached as our first introduction. Yet, as soon as each rape is over, Michele quickly returns to a cold, unfeeling state of being. Dissociation is symptomatic of trauma and all that must be pushed away to survive it. Rape isn't the only trauma in Michele Leblanc's life.

Trauma

Trauma comes in many forms, but it always involves terror. Michele has suffered the terror of rape, but also the terror of childhood trauma. *Elle* leads us to believe that this early trauma was the horror of suddenly, at age 10, discovering her father is a killer. Her life turned upside down that night he came home with blood all over him. Afterward, she was misunderstood, implicated, ostracized, hated, and associated with the murders by a photo taken when he was captured: a little girl, shell-shocked - in a trance.

Yet, a man doesn't become a killer overnight. There is something in his character, a monstrous rage or envy, a perversity, even something predatory in making the sign of the cross on the foreheads of neighborhood children. Perhaps he was a pedophile. Did he sexually molest Michele? Her symptoms might say so. Clearly, as far as Georges Leblanc goes, his physical boundaries with children were poor. And he had a capacity for murder that his Catholic conscience could not contain. But Verhoeven leaves us with many gaps and questions, letting us fill in the blanks. If we consider Michele Leblanc's parents, though, I know this without a doubt: her trauma started as a baby.

Early trauma is what's done or what happens to a child. But, trauma is equally about parental failure. About what is not given, the protections not there, the needed care absent; and the parental projections put into a child. A baby is not the only one struggling with impulses of love and hate. Children can be the repositories for their parent's hatred, self-hatred, and for many other unwanted feelings or parts of themselves. In Michele's case, these projections are her father's "sociopathy," his "monstrousness," as well as her mother's selfishness, cruelty, and provocations. Parents who use their children in this way are not safe. The terror in all traumatic situations is the helplessness of being in very unsafe territory.

For Michele (or anyone) to decipher who she is apart from a parent's projections is nearly impossible without analytic help. Plus, in the wake of such parental failure - there is frustration and hopelessness; fantasies of being bad and unlovable, and all the defensive maneuvers set up to manage that despair; including perversion.

Robert Stoller, a foremost analytic expert in perversion, says in his book *Sexual Excitement*: "To the extent that, in its earliest relationships to its parents, a child feels it is debased, it will, in creating sexual excitement throughout life, reverse the process of debasement in fantasy so that the sexual objects are now ... its victims ... The exact details of the script underlying excitement are meant to reproduce and repair the *precise* traumas and frustrations..." (p. 13)

This is Michele's fate.

Georges Leblanc is serving a life sentence. A TV special will soon air titled: "The Accused Will Rise." Michele's father is not only once again in the media, but he is also in the forefront of her mind; resurrected in the rape. The trauma he's responsible for rises up inside her - with all the associated psychological repercussions she now must find an effective way to battle.

Then there's Michele's mother, Irene Leblanc (Judith Magre): self-preoccupied, "Botoxed", and sexually provocative; flaunting her much younger lover/fiancé/gold digger right in front of her daughter and everyone else ("It's *my* sex life. You're a little bitch, Michele.") This is a mother who couldn't have had more to give Michele as a child than she has now.

In self-defense, Michele is cold and condescending. When Irene provokingly asks what Michele would do if she remarried, Michele answers: "It's simple. I'd kill you." Irene replies: "You always wanted a sanitized version of life."

"Sanitizing" might just be another good word for dissociation. Reality is too painful and too lonely. She simply can't be there. And, as we watch the adult Michele Leblanc, she's not. How could she feel? What she'd have to feel is unbearable.

A Cold, Hard Shell

Early trauma leaves no choice but to construct a cold, hard, shell. Call it, "tough girl," "I don't care, why should I?" "I hate everyone," "I don't need you. I need nothing, I can take care of myself," or indifference to the feelings of anyone else (but just as much, her own.) In my experience, this kind of hard shelled, I need no one, no one will have power over *me*, is always there in some form in each traumatized person. It's the result of having no one to count on.

We see this in Michele. After the rape, she's clearly terrified; she sleeps with a hammer – alone, protecting *herself*. She makes no calls for help. This is a part of the "I need no one" self-sufficiency, and she must believe it, especially when she's scared and helpless. She says later (and this is a common fantasy after trauma): "It's over. It doesn't need talking about anymore."

It's not over. But, if she stays closed off, she's in control. And, she can change the locks. If she leaves the door open (to need or love), the trauma is revisited – in a rape, a memory, or an experience of devastating hurt.

Michele's recent trauma returns in a flashback when the cat meows while the locks are being changed, just as he did at the door when the masked rapist stormed his way in. The flashback shows a fuller version of the rape:

She's sitting at the table eating. The cat meows: "How did you get outside?" She lets the cat in, the door won't close, and a masked man pushes his way in, in broad daylight. She screams. Now we see the whole range of her terror. She fights the intruder. He pushes her down to the floor. She grabs the tablecloth, pieces of china and glass shattering, as he rips her dress open. She kicks. He beats her in the face, penetrates her; she keeps screaming, he puts his hand over her mouth.

The cat impassively stares - a reflection of her necessary detachment.

After the flashback, Michele gets a text, INCONNU (Unknown number): "You were very tight for a woman your age." The rapist knows her. She buys the strongest pepper spray she can find: called *safety angel*. She's not safe now; she wasn't safe as a child. We

see it in her empty stare in the photo taken when the police arrived to find her with her father burning everything in the house. Michele's confused sense of "badness" comes through in her description of the photo: "Me, half naked, smeared with ash, the photo of a little girl as psychopath ..." It's not. It's the photo of a traumatized little girl, not an accomplice.

Any trauma in adulthood is made worse if the terror of a childhood trauma is reawakened. When Michele is forced to speak to a police inspector, after Patrick's death, he asks her: "When this man appeared masked in your house, you never suspected for a moment it might be your neighbor?" She answers: "Who could imagine such a thing?"

It's a lie, but then again, it's not. Who could imagine her father coming home one night, a murderer, covered with blood? Something even more drastic than the cold, tough "need no one" shell must be done to manage that awful truth.

Why Perversion?

According to Robert Stoller, perversion is both the erotic form of hatred and "the product of anxiety... if the observer knew *everything* about what had happened in the life of the person he is studying, he would find these historical events represented in the details of the manifest sexual act ... the perversion is a *fantasy* put into action – a defensive structure ..." (p. Xiv in *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred*)

Elle tells us quite a lot about what happened in Michele Leblanc's life.

She was doing her homework when her father arrived home with blood all over him ... after murdering families in the neighborhood. He decided to burn everything in the house. She helped feed the fire: "We gutted the place; curtains, carpets, tables, chairs, all in the fire. It was exciting. You get caught up in it." This excitement is later translated into the sadomasochistic game. It is a controlled excitement – a defense against the anxieties of horror, terror, and grief; and also an expression of understandable hate.

Michele's sadomasochistic defense began with the excitement of burning up everything on that terrible night. It's continued into adulthood in the company she owns with Anna and, later, in the game she plays out with Patrick. Michele's video game company creates violent, sexual games. When we're introduced to the game they're working towards launching, a monster is attacking a woman, much as Michele was attacked – raping her and jamming one of its tendrils into her skull.

This company and the game represent an unconscious fantasy Michele lives out to manage the psychological consequences of trauma. Her sadomasochism is designed to preserve power and dominance over the part of her that carries all the feelings she has disowned.

There is a split in Michele (and I've seen it in all my severely traumatized patients) between an often harsh pseudo self-sufficiency and the traumatized, terrified, child self who can depend on no one. This child self is pushed aside by an internal bully, with attacks such as: "how could you be so stupid," whenever there is a feeling of sadness or

an urge to turn to anyone for help. Some of these bullies can be quite perverse. Yet, in their perversity, they function as a protective agency of sorts. The baby self is too terrified to exist.

The Forgotten Baby

A traumatized baby disappears; lost within the coldness of dissociation, turned against and bullied by an internal voice that keeps it quiet and hidden. Both father and mother treated Michele cruelly. In concert with her parent's projections, her own son, Vincent, now becomes heir to Michele's hated baby self: "the big lout with nothing special about him. How did he come out of me?" In *Elle*, Michele's early traumatic history repeats itself with Vincent. She too is a mother walled off, self-preoccupied, cold, and unable to give what is needed.

One of *Elle's* more poignant moments takes place between Vincent and Michele when his girlfriend, Josie, threatens to take their baby and leave. As he visibly struggles with the loss of his son, it suddenly dawns on Michele: "It was always about the baby for you. You were in it for him." This is a painfully stark realization. No one was ever "in it" for Michele nor could she be "in it" for Vincent. Both are forgotten babies, pushed aside, and left to find their own ways – Vincent not so successfully.

We are reminded how easily a baby can be forgotten when its parents are self-preoccupied. As *Elle* ends, Vincent has successfully carried off his job planning the launch party for Michele's company (and he's killed Patrick). Josie has returned, enthralled with his ability to make money and his sexy new car. As they excitedly show the car to Michele and start to walk into her house, they don't remember the baby, still in the back seat. He lets out a squeal. So far, this baby still has its voice.

But, being a baby in a frightening situation, as Michele was, leaves that child prone to the seduction of a fantasy object. This object poses as a friend and advisor, serving to fill terrifyingly lonely spaces while shutting out the need for human dependency. This is a major part of perverse defensive organizations. Herbert Rosenfeld (1971) understood it well:

"In some narcissistic patients the ... psychotic structure or organization ... is split off from the rest of the personality. This psychotic structure is like a delusional world or object, into which parts of the self tend to withdraw. It appears to be dominated by an omnipotent or omniscient extremely ruthless part of the self, which creates the notion that within the delusional object there is complete painlessness but also freedom to indulge in any sadistic activity. The whole structure is committed to narcissistic self-sufficiency ..." (page 175)

Narcissistic self-sufficiency describes how Michele Leblanc lives. Michele's parents failed her. Now she hates them but, more importantly, she hates her own very human needs. She is, as Rosenfeld says, withdrawn into a fantasy in which indulgence in sadistic activity has the purpose of "complete painlessness." She will not feel. She will need no one. She will have power over the dependency involved in love.

Michele's love/hate problem is lived out in the sadomasochistic game she plays with her rapist. Their game begins with that unexpected text from an unknown number ("You were very tight for a woman your age"). She cannot be vulnerable or helpless. If he has her number, she'd better turn the tables so that she has his.

"The Sadomasochistic Game"

In the sadomasochistic game she plays out with Patrick, Michele seems the masochist. Yet, masochism is complicated; it has its sadistic side:

Stoller says: (p. 124): "I do not think people become masochistic because they truly believe they deserve to be punished. Rather ... secretly, they are busy with their foxy little sadisms.... Masochism...is a technique of control, first discovered in childhood following trauma, *the onslaught of the unexpected*. The child believes it can prevent further trauma by re-enacting the original trauma. Then, as *master of the script*, he is no longer the victim; *he can decide for himself when to suffer pain* rather than having it strike without warning ..."

This describes perfectly the purpose of Michele's sadomasochistic defense. Let's follow her game with Patrick through some notable scenes and themes:

1. Triangles and conquests:

We find Michele entering into a triangle as her sadomasochistic game with Patrick begins. She masturbates, as she voyeuristically watches him and his wife Rebecca through the window, unloading a nativity scene from their car. He's just (supposedly) fought off the returning attacker. She finishes, goes next door, and invites the couple to her Christmas get-together the next night.

At the party, Michele begins her seduction, playing footsie with Patrick, under the table, while his Catholic wife sits nearby, saying Grace. In the film, we find Michele stealing both Rebecca's and her friend Anna's husbands right in front of their noses.

There are other triangles in the film, of course, showing us Michele's need for control over feelings of jealousy and exclusion. There is her mother and her boy toy, Ralf. There is Michele's ex-husband Richard and his young yoga teacher girlfriend, Helene. These lovers are threats. No one will interfere, take Michele's place, or have the upper hand. We see her hostility clearly - hostility originating from a child's frustration and helplessness.

Stoller notes: (p. xvii) "Perversion ... is a result of family dynamics that, by inducing fear, force the child who yearns for full immersion in the Oedipal situation ... to avoid it."

But, there is no unconscious avoiding. Where there is trauma, the Oedipal situation can come to represent watching others get what has been stolen, with all the associated rage and envy. Perverse defensive organizations (such as sadomasochism) unconsciously live this out and turn the tables. She'll take what she wants.

2. Onslaught of the unexpected

Suspecting that the rapist works for her after her face is superimposed on the female heroine in her video game and sent around the office to humiliate her, Michele looks for him, but is unsuccessful. She goes home to find the car seat she ordered for her son Vincent's (Jonas Bloquet) baby. Using scissors to open the package, she takes the car seat out just as the masked rapist barges again through the glass door. He kicks her in the face. She hits him with the car seat; he punches her and starts to rape her. She grabs the scissors, stabs him in the hand, and tears off his mask.

It's Patrick. Horrified by the revelation, she screams: "Get out. Get out now." This repeats her early trauma: the terrifying discovery that her kind father is a killer - and it increases her need for control.

3. Return of the Unbearable

A TV news story reports that Georges Leblanc has lost his bid for parole. A split photo shows him young and handsome as Patrick, juxtaposed with an image of the old man. Michele spits out: "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you," shuts off the TV, and drives to the prison to personally spit in her father's face.

She goes to take the power back, over her fear. She doesn't get the chance. He's dead. Her father hung himself after he heard she was coming.

Driving away from the prison, her phone rings. An intrusive reporter asks: "Are you feeling anger? Grief? Relief, perhaps?" As suddenly as unwanted feelings threaten to surface, a deer jumps in front of her car. She crashes, injuring her knee. Anna doesn't answer. Richard (Charles Berling), her ex-husband, doesn't answer. Once again, no one is there to help.

Michele can't allow these feelings to set her off the course of the life she's built after her father became a killer. To be sure of this, she had no choice but to also become a certain kind of killer. She's a killer of feeling; of anyone she might need or want.

4. Becoming Master of the Script

Feelings must be silenced. Michele must, as Stoller says, "*decide for [herself] when to suffer pain* rather than having it strike without warning ..." With the reporter's intrusive call, and the crash, these stakes get very high.

She calls Patrick. She will regain control. There is manic excitement in that, like burning everything in the fire.

Patrick comes quickly and takes care of her injury, smiling; the seductively "kind" Patrick - but it is a trick. She knows that now and asks, challengingly: "So how was it? Was it good? Did you enjoy it? Why did you do it?" He looks at her, with a serious face and says: "*It was necessary.*" His response ups the Ante for Michele.

Michele and Vincent meet Patrick at the market. Rebecca is away. Soon they are eating at the rapist's table. Vincent drinks too much and falls asleep. Patrick brings coffee, in front of a fire. Michele rubs her feet across the rug towards him. There is masochistic power in seduction, a repeat of the footsie game. She notices the warm floor. Patrick tells her – the warmth is from an inverted flame boiler he installed himself; does she want to see it - in the basement? The exciting game becomes more dangerous, necessarily so. Since she can't allow warmth and kindness from anyone, she'll take this to the edge. He closes the door behind them.

There it is – the red, glowing, furnace: hell's fire. We move more deeply into Michele's dark dance. Patrick is Michele's devil, her lover, her rapist - her betrayer – her father. *This is her game now; she can choose to play it.* She smiles as she holds out her hand - a willing participant. When he starts beating her, she suddenly turns the tables. She's not the helpless victim any longer. She wants it: "Do it," she demands.

Patrick is derailed: "It doesn't work like that, not for me. It has to be like before." She hits him across the face. He punches her back, and takes her. She writhes on the floor long after he's done: in pain, orgasmic - both. As Stoller says, erotic excitement is preserved. The orgasmic experience (just as she demanded for her video game) is turned up.

5. Twisting helplessness to power

At the launch party for Michele and Anna's video game, another Oedipal power play is at work. These kinds of power plays are a part of the perverse defense; she must have power over all feelings; including jealousy and deprivation. Michele gives her keys to Vincent, as Anna's husband Robert watches her seduce another man. She tells Vincent that Patrick is taking her home. She's ended her affair with Robert (depriving him of what he wants), but he's just flaunted a weekend away with Anna to make her jealous. To get back at him, she hurts Anna with the revelation of their affair. No one will have what she doesn't.

In the car with Patrick, Michele says: "It's twisted, between us. It's sick ... I was in some kind of weird denial, but I see it clearly now. You don't expect to get away with what you did to me? I'll do what I should have done at once ... I'll go to the police. I'll tell them everything."

But, she's *telling him*. She's still playing the twisted game: enticing him to hate her; to beat her; even to kill her. Is this the suicidal wish we often see in traumatized patients – the ultimate out, the only way to ensure feelings are kept dead?

Patrick drops her off at home. She goes in; and looks towards the window. Waiting.

This time, he surprises her from behind. She hits him over the head with a vase, and they face each other. (Who will win?) He momentarily disarms her by stroking her face and neck. She gives in to old, closed away longings. Just as she does, he rips off her dress, and viciously overpowers her.

Suddenly, Vincent is there, hitting Patrick with a hard object; smashing and bloodying his head; reminiscent of the photos we saw of her father's victims. Michele looks Patrick in the eye. She's unconsciously drawn him into her snare, barely evading her own death. Before dying, Patrick looks at Michele, stunned, hurt, and confused: "*Why?*" Her "why" has its own necessity. That necessity is triumph.

What Triumph Has To Do With It

Triumph is Michele's safety angel; her personal "pepper spray" to fight off unwanted feelings. Triumph gives Michele a sense of power over the helplessness of a traumatized little girl. She is the one who decides; she can do what she wants and nothing else will matter. She says to Anna: "Shame isn't a strong enough emotion to stop us from doing anything." Michele knows what she's done – to Anna, her son Vincent, to others. Cruelty is a sometimes strangely *necessary* defense.

If your mother is a narcissist and your father a killer, how could you not be terrified of dependency? How could you not do whatever it takes to shut down any instinct to love or need anyone again?

What matters is this:

Michele must triumph over the child she was, seen as psychopath; and hated. She must triumph over feeling bad and unlovable; over believing that to need anyone is weak; over certainty she'll be abandoned and hurt again; over feelings of loss and loneliness when there is no one to count on; over feelings that are too much to bear alone.

What is necessary – is triumph over the need for love, by turning the tables and having control.

Trauma Doesn't End With Triumph

When Vincent cries after he kills Patrick, Michele says: "It's over." But, it's not. It isn't over when Michele paints the room (where she was raped) bright yellow. It isn't over either when *Elle* abruptly ends and Anna joins her, at her parents' graves, saying: "I heard you were here." Michele replies: "Physically, at least," and we know that she has managed to shut away her grief - as she's done her entire life.

Yes, there's been triumph – that "necessary" defense against all painful feelings. Yet, by the end of *Elle*, Michele manages to soften a bit. She feels enough guilt to try to repair some of the hurtful things she's done. She gives Vincent, her son, a long overdue chance for success. After callously bashing Richard's car, she sets up a meeting to make his idea for a video game an actual possibility. With Anna, she admits that what she did with Robert was "more than a little shabby."

Softening, though, is no easy feat for someone as traumatized as Michele. Without help, the perverse defense soon takes over or there's a retreat to another form of self-

protection. For Michele, we see a different defense take form – one where her longings still live.

Anna's kicked Robert out, Vincent's grown: "it's just the two of us," she says. Michele asks to move in with her for a while – with Anna, who never stopped loving her no matter what she did. This, I think, is Michele's fantasy of an idealized mother whose undivided love will erase the past. I've seen it in my office many times, when the emotional aftermath of trauma and neglect is much too hard to feel.

And so, we watch the two of them walk shoulder to shoulder, through the gravestones; through all that has died and been left unmourned.

Michele has danced with her rapist/her father/flaunting danger. She's triumphed over terror; over love; over need, over any feeling at all. Soft is dangerous. Love can hurt you. Michele can't let that happen again.

A Better End

There's a better end for trauma. Let's go back to the small bird that smashed against the window and startled Michele out of a flashback.

The little bird is injured. Michele rescues it from the cat, gently picks it up, and tries to call for help. But, once again, help is not available. She puts the bird in a brightly colored box and throws it in the trash - just as she's boxed away the traumatized little girl inside her, because there was no other choice.

The triumphant woman isn't the one that needs to walk victorious into the bright Sun, as Michele's video game heroine does. The sadomasochistic game will only end when the sad, hurt, frightened child, imprisoned in the perverse enactment, is found.

To find that child is the challenge in analytic work with trauma and perverse defenses. It's a difficult task. Perversion is a necessary defense, and it isn't conscious. The risk of vulnerability, opening up to need, a feeling of dependency, or a desire for love – incites the perverse part of the self to take control. As Stoller (1975) says: "In the perverse act, the past is rubbed out ... But the need to do it again - unendingly ... comes from one's inability to get completely rid of the danger, the trauma ... it happened..." (p. 6)

If the necessity that drives perverse activity is ever to stop, what happened must be grieved – and safety found in softness and allowing love. Soldiering on in omnipotent self-sufficiency is not the answer. The traumatized child, with all its feelings and fears of dependency, needs help standing up to that internal bully who calls dependency "weak" and sadness "stupid." This can only be done with someone who understands the specific reasons for the perversion and for the cold, hard, shell. And, this Michele Leblanc did not have.

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