



Things To Come

Director: Mia Hansen-Løve
Country: France
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A review by Mark Kermode for *The Guardian*:

Is there a more commanding screen presence than Isabelle Huppert? From the spiralling American madness of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* to the diverse demands of Claire Denis's African-set colonial parable *White Material* and Brillante Mendoza's Philippines hostage drama *Captive*, Huppert has proved ready to rise to any challenge. Claude Chabrol famously cast her as a teenage murderer in 1978's *Violette Nozière* and a covert poisoner in 2000's *Merci pour le chocolat*, while Chris Honoré called upon her to tackle the taboo subject of incest in *Ma mère*. Most famously, in Michael Haneke's unflinching *The Piano Teacher*, she took cinemagoers to the very edge of a masochistic abyss, with harrowing results.

Despite her reputation for going the extra mile, however, Huppert's true talent is for understatement, conveying complex conflict through restrained physical gesture, a quality too often misdescribed as "cool". In Joachim Trier's recent *Louder Than Bombs*, she was a war photographer who dominated the drama in absentia, a ghostly presence in a fractured family. Now, in this Berlin Silver Bear winner from Mia Hansen-Løve – writer-director of such intimate films as *Father of My Children* and *Goodbye First Love* – Huppert delivers a note-perfect warm and wry performance as a philosophy teacher whose life is defined by ideas rather than circumstance, a woman of substance – intellectual, emotional, financial – who faces unexpected constraints and freedoms when the assumed certainties of her domestic life unravel.

We first meet Huppert's Nathalie Chazeaux en route to the tidal island of Grand Bé off Brittany, earnestly discussing the visual quality of music with her husband, Heinz (André Marcon). At the grave of Chateaubriand, Heinz lingers by the lonely sea view while his family scamper ahead, warning of an



incoming tide. It's a sunny family scene, but it has a gently portentous air, a sense that, to quote Nathalie's infuriating publisher, "the future is compromised". Jumping ahead several years, we meet Nathalie again in Paris where protests are preventing her students from attending class, to the annoyance of the one-time communist ("just for three years, like most intellectuals"). When Heinz taunts her about her shifting politics, Nathalie scornfully replies that he hasn't changed since he was 18, when Kant's "starry sky above me and moral law within me" became his immutable credo. Yet Heinz has a secret that will prove that love is even less certain than politics or philosophy. "I thought you'd love me forever," says Nathalie, ruefully. "What an idiot."

While there may be superficial similarities between Nathalie's predicament and Huppert's heroine in Benoît Jacquot's 2009 *Villa Amalia*, the two films could not be more different. Here, Hansen-Løve serves up unapologetic discussions of Rousseau, radicalism and revolution in a world in which the Unabomber's manifesto sits side by side with the classics and clerics declare that "doubt and questioning are inextricably bound up with faith". It sounds unbearably heavy, but there is such life in the character of Nathalie (partly inspired by Hansen-Løve's mother) that this weight often turns to levity and laughter. Crucially, Nathalie's

profession is central to her existence, unfashionably so for modern cinema. Beyond her marital problems, Nathalie's primary relationship is with her books, a bond that cannot be broken. Indeed, the film's most harrowing spectacle shows her once tightly packed bookshelves riddled with gaping holes after a domestic cull leaves her beloved books lying on their sides.

Background noise is provided by the constant cries for help of Nathalie's mother, with Edith Scob superbly querulous as the former model whose ambitions and anxieties have been bequeathed to her daughter, along with her overweight cat, Pandora. As both a daughter and a mother, Nathalie fulfils a dual role that is threatened at the very moment that her husband proves inconstant. Yet rather than looking for a trite romantic "solution" to her isolation (there's a frisson of attraction with her protege, Fabien, seductively played by Roman Kolinka), Hansen-Løve keeps Nathalie purposefully in flux and on the move, Denis Lenoir's camera constantly catching her striding hither and yon, proceeding as briskly as the film itself.



After the rave-beats of 2014's *Eden*, *Things to Come* makes significant use of silence, broken by sparse, specific songs, from Woody Guthrie's *Ship in the Sky* to the Fleetwoods' close-harmony rendition of *Unchained Melody*. "We listened to the same records for 20 years," Nathalie tells Fabien. "I was sick of it." For all its disruptiveness, Nathalie's situation provides an opportunity to change the record, the future waiting to be written upon the endlessly expressive face of Isabelle Huppert.

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