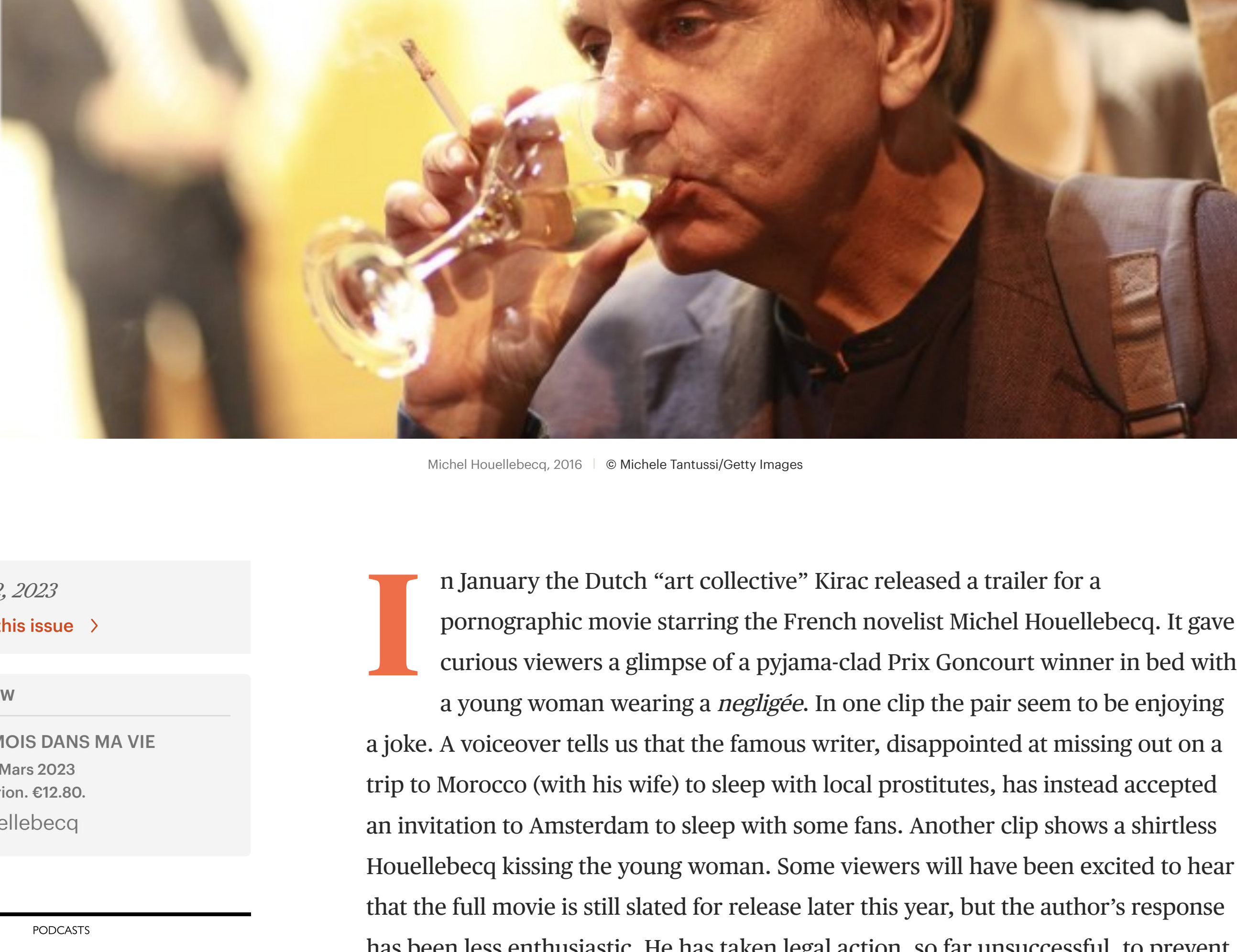


Blue movie

Michel Houellebecq's latest provocation falls flat

By Russell Williams



Michel Houellebecq, 2016 | © Michele Tantussi/Getty Images

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In January the Dutch “art collective” Kirac released a trailer for a pornographic movie starring the French novelist Michel Houellebecq. It gave curious viewers a glimpse of a pyjama-clad Prix Goncourt winner in bed with a young woman wearing a *negligée*. In one clip the pair seem to be enjoying a joke. A voiceover tells us that the famous writer, disappointed at missing out on a trip to Morocco (with his wife) to sleep with local prostitutes, has instead accepted an invitation to Amsterdam to sleep with some fans. Another clip shows a shirtless Houellebecq kissing the young woman. Some viewers will have been excited to hear that the full movie is still slated for release later this year, but the author’s response has been less enthusiastic. He has taken legal action, so far unsuccessful, to prevent its release.

On top of that, at the end of December Chems-Eddine Hafiz - Algerian lawyer and rector of the Grande Mosquée de Paris - had filed a complaint against the author with the police. The occasion for his complaint was a long interview between Houellebecq and the philosopher Michel Onfray, published in Onfray’s *Front Populaire* magazine. In the piece Houellebecq says that “the wish of the ‘native’ French population is not that Muslims assimilate, but simply that they stop stealing from them, attacking them [...] and that they respect them”. Later he says that he anticipates “terror attacks and shoot-outs in the mosques and cafés frequented by Muslims” - what he describes as “Bataclan in reverse” - if “native” French people grow to feel that French territory is coming under “Islamist” control. Anti-Islamic provocations are nothing new for the writer of *Soumission* and *Les Particules élémentaires*, who was acquitted of inciting racial hatred in a series of anti-Muslim comments made after the publication of *Plateforme* in 2001; but in this case Hafiz withdrew his complaint after a meeting with Houellebecq brokered by France’s chief rabbi, Haïm Korsia.

The novelist looks back on this interesting start to 2023 in *Quelques mois dans ma vie*, his first memoir. This short book considers both Hafiz’s complaint - Houellebecq recasts the offending quotes from *Front Populaire* (admitting that perhaps he didn’t read the proofs properly) - and the Kirac affair. It is understandable that Houellebecq should want to clarify his remarks about Muslims. To his credit he apologises and offers a degree of nuance. Though the remarks are still broadly anti-Islam, there is no incitement in them.

But this is really a book about the sex film. And any credit the author earns by reworking his interview comments is swiftly lost by his decision to tie them to a *récit* of his adventures in adult cinema, where, Houellebecq argues, he has been misrepresented, lied to and exploited. Using the animal fable format familiar to readers of his fiction, he constructs a story around three bestial characters, the Cockroach (the film’s director-producer) and two young women - the Sow and the Turkey - who agreed to sleep with Houellebecq and his wife. Houellebecq explains: the Cockroach initially approached the writer with news of a young fan who wanted to sleep with him and upload the footage to her OnlyFans account. The woman and the film-maker travelled to Paris from Amsterdam and were vetted over dinner by Madame Houellebecq. In the belief that he was - charitably - indulging the Sow’s exhibitionism, rather than primarily giving her content, the Houellebecqs took the Sow to the bedroom. The Cockroach held the camera. Houellebecq, it seems, just about enjoyed the experience, but grew uneasy as he came to understand that “[his] notoriety as an author could confer a certain market value to [his] sex organs”.

Despite this unease, he continues to correspond with the Cockroach. It’s at this point that details become sketchy and everything - the author, the cast of characters, the book itself - starts to feel grubby and implausible. Houellebecq says he had no intention of continuing his porn career, then somehow finds himself on a train to Amsterdam where he’s due to be filmed having sex with three young women, including the Turkey (a friend of the Sow), all of them “keen readers of [his] books”. For some reason Houellebecq signs a contract that, like the galleys of his interviews, he doesn’t read closely. Anyway, he ends up not having sex with any of these women, but throws the Cockroach out of his bedroom. A few weeks later he discovers the trailer online and learns of the film-maker’s plans to release a film based on his tryst with the Trout in Paris, footage that the novelist claims was captured by deceit. (It was intended for OnlyFans, not general release, he argues.)

It might be tempting to laugh at all of this, and to think of Houellebecq simply as a sort of M. Hulot staggering from sex film to sex film in a dirty raincoat, were it not so offensive. One understands the author’s impulse to explain, to seek alternative redress for what he perceives as his mistreatment, particularly when his legal attempts to ban the film have so far come to naught. And we can just about sympathise with him when he learns that a Dutch writer, Sid Lukkassen, felt similarly ensnared after starring in another Kirac film with the same Cockroach and Sow. But there is naivety at work, too. A Google search would have given Houellebecq sufficient idea of the film-maker’s oeuvre. (The Cockroach claims to have sent Houellebecq examples of his work.) And can we believe that a writer sometimes described as a “pornographer” doesn’t know what OnlyFans is? Or what a signed contract means?

Houellebecq maintains an impressive inability or unwillingness to read the room in a moment attuned to sexual politics. On arriving in Amsterdam he is met by an unfriendly cameraman who refuses to shake his hand, and “for the first time in my life I felt treated, absolutely, like the subject of an animal documentary”. (I’ve written “get over it” in the margins of my copy.) Then: “at the idea that these images can be broadcast against my will, I felt for the first time, something that appears to me to be akin to what female victims of rape describe”. At this point the reader begins to wonder why this book exists at all. Why didn’t his editor, whom Houellebecq so often praises, suggest a cut? Or his publisher? “Lighter” moments (“I’ve never had any reason to complain about my cock”) fall flat. What of the reality of women who have been raped? What of the sex workers with whom he is happy to “perform”, but whom he dismisses as “sows” and “turkeys” and *putes*? Given his experiences with the Grande Mosquée, we can assume that Houellebecq read his proofs this time and this vile language is all intentional. Houellebecq tells us proudly that he was left untouched by #MeToo, but seems to forget a profile (from 2000) in the *New York Times Magazine*, in which, Emily Eakin remembers, “He reached over and petted my knee. ‘What’s your name again?’ he mumbled. ‘How would you like to be in my erotic film?’”.

If he feels exploited he should keep talking to his lawyers, not conduct a failed experiment with memoir, a genre better explored by Annie Ernaux, Constance Debré and Emmanuel Carrère, among others. His adoption of the genre also poses a problem for those who have championed his work to date. Readers who defend his “provocations”, which include misogynistic and anti-feminist as well as anti-Muslim comments, point to the fictional embodiment of these ideas (belonging to the character, not the author) or use the Louis-Ferdinand Céline defence. Just as Céline’s worst antisemitism appears in his pamphlets rather than his novels, so too the worst of Houellebecq frequently appears in interview, or in essays at a distance from the fiction.

The problem, as Nelly Kaprièlian showed in her review of his *Anéantir* (TLS, March 18, 2022), is that it is becoming hard to separate the characters from their creator. In opting for memoir, and by putting an unframed portrait of the author at the heart of his provocation in a volume published by Flammarion (which also publishes his novels), Michel Houellebecq pushes the worst of himself to the fore.

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- This review was amended on June 1. The correct “Sow” has replaced “Trout”, which was erroneously used as a translation for “trueie” in a previous version

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