



## **The Body of The Film: The Evocation of Winnicott's Original Facilitating Environment in Michael Hanake's *Amour* (2012).**

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At the stage that is being discussed it is necessary not to think of the baby as a person who gets hungry, and whose instinctual desires may be met or frustrated but to think of the baby as...a being who is all the time *on the brink of unbearable anxiety*, love at this stage can only be shown in body-care (Winnicott 1962, 57-8 original italics).

### **Introduction**

What would happen if we were to replace the word baby with spectator in the quotation above? A spectator who is not looking for food, but who is seeking psychic nourishment. Let us imagine that her anxiety is constellated around the fear that life may have no meaning and there is no point to anything. Her hunger is founded on the life-enhancing search for meaning and personal transformation. Where does it lead us if we see the film as if it were an entity that soothes and responds to the spectator? It is my intention to explore these questions.

The deployment of the notion of the 'as ifness' of the screen is not unusual. For example, to conceptualise the screen as if it were a mirror is commonplace. This deployment of the screen-as-mirror in the excavation of the peculiar dynamics that unfold between the spectator and the film has stimulated fruitful conversations, controversies and discussions from a primarily Lacanian perspective (e.g. Baudry 1992, Copjec 2000, Metz 1982, Zizek 1989). What I am proposing here is to show that an equally interesting and complementary conversation emerges if we play with the idea of film as a symbolic equivalent of a parental body that the spectator responds to accordingly, using Winnicott (1896-1971), the British psychoanalyst renowned for his insights into the interpersonal world of the mother and her baby (see Caldwell and Joyce [2011]), to provide the theoretical scaffolding. It is a fundamentally optimistic reading of the relationship between the moving image and the spectator that ultimately imagines film as a gesture of care.

I wish to extend this metaphor of film-as-body somewhat further and suggest that we approach Haneke's *Amour* as if it were a maternal figure that the spectator responds and reacts to in ways that resonate with the early verbal and pre-verbal experiences of the human infant. As a consequence, Haneke, in this paradigm, is symbolically constructed as if he were a parental entity. The film becomes a symbolic manifestation of his body that functions to create a space within which individual creativity in the service of making meaning can flourish through sensitive holding, empathic handling and a stimulating presentation of objects. It contributes to, and hopefully extends, conversations, not necessarily from a purely psychoanalytic perspective, that seek to explain the pleasures and challenges inherent in spectating

through revealing the infantile precursors of the more mature experience (e.g. Carroll 2003, 33*Amour*, starring two veterans of French cinema Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva, won the Palme d' Or at the Cannes Film Festival of that year. The narrative charts the decline of Anne as she succumbs to the ravages of a stroke that has a profound effect on her bodily and mental functioning. Her trajectory into incapacity traces a path of increasing dependency. This narrative thrust makes it particularly relevant here as will become clear as my exploration progresses. Suffice it to point out at this juncture that Anne changes from a cultured, intelligent older woman to a paralyzed being who is unable to communicate other than through cries and grunts. Due to the uncompromising nature of the film's portrayal of her journey into incapacity, the spectator is a privileged witness to someone who is, by the end of the film, in a similar state to the baby that Winnicott speaks of in the introductory quotation.

There is a potentially disturbing reflection here: through witnessing Anne's decline and inevitable demise, the film invites the spectator to think about a possible future for herself and those she is close to. A significant part of my argument revolves around the idea that, in this film, Haneke-as-parent invites the spectator to think about her own relationship with aging and fragility. Winnicott, in the opening quotation, suggests that the facilitation of the transformation of unbearable, inchoate terror into a fear that can be managed is a parental function. Intense anxiety is thus made tolerable through responsive, sensitive care. *Amour*, as I hope to show, fulfils a similar role in an act of symbolic equivalence.

My focus on the body and bodily care may leave one wondering about the place of language and the word in the deployment of this metaphor. It is my sense that, in the primitive world of the infant, the boundaries between the experiences of the different senses is not as clearly delineated as in more mature circumstances. Daniel Stern, speaking of the sensory world of the baby, conveys it thus, 'Visual information predominates over the auditory. In other words, we hear what we see, not what is said' (1998, loc 856). If we extend this thought further we could say that we also feel what we hear. Words may and do stimulate a bodily response.

Haneke demonstrates sensitivity to this interplay between the body and language through gestures of care and kindness. For example, in a sequence that I shall look at in more detail below, he presents the spectator with a series of stills of pictures that are hanging in Georges and Anne's flat. A disturbing scene of high emotional intensity in which Georges is unsuccessfully encouraging Anne to take a drink precedes this sequence. What does the spectator 'hear' and 'feel' when she sees this series of stills? I suggest she hears a reassuring voice and senses a comforting presence. This offers her the opportunity to gather herself together in order to think after bearing witness to this troubling incident. This, in turn, contributes to the provision of Winnicott's somewhat enigmatic concept of a facilitating environment.

The term 'facilitating environment' demonstrates his predisposition to coin theoretical terms that, superficially at least, appear to have a meaning that is obvious to grasp. Winnicott himself, however, is seldom specific about defining his terms or

tracking developmental pathways. In order for there to be some common ground here I shall set out my understanding of this nebulous term ‘facilitating environment’. He saw the optimum environment for human development as one in which the caregiver welcomes the infant into the world by colluding absolutely with her needs. She does this in order to allow the baby the illusion of her omnipotence, thereby protecting her from the terror relating to her absolute dependence. The parental task is to gradually disillusion the infant regarding her fantasy of her own absolute agency. In Winnicott’s characteristically optimistic view, this process of gradual disillusionment liberates a creativity that could be deployed in the service of a fulfilling life. The infant herself devises ways to make the reality of her dependency more manageable; she is able to do this through the support that a facilitating environment offers. In Winnicottian terms, she will have been handled and held in such a way that the objects that she is presented with can be used and invested with a personal meaning that may, in infancy, ease the pain and fear associated with the absence of the care-giver. The signal and first manifestation of this achievement is the child’s creation of the ‘transitional object’ (see Winnicott 1971a, 1-34), that is, the irreplaceable teddy bear, for instance, that can be said to stand in for the loved object during times of separation.

As we will see, Haneke exploits this process by presenting the spectator with objects, such as the wayward pigeon that finds its way into the apartment that I will look at in more detail below, which invite her to make it a personal creation by investing it with her own meaning. The Winnicottian spectator is therefore constructed as an autonomous being who is liberated to find her own meanings in the external world and not ‘caught up in the creativity of someone else’ (Winnicott 1971b, 87). For Winnicott, the personal creative act lays the foundation for a satisfying life. He stakes a particular claim for the visual, saying that, ‘It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living’ (1971b, 87). He embraces a wholly democratic notion of creativity as available to anyone, not only the talented. For him, ‘The creation stands between the observer and the artist’s creativity’ (1971b, 93). *Amour*, as I hope to demonstrate, through its provision of a facilitating environment, contributes to the discovery that life is worth living and gives the spectator access to an authentic experience of her own creativity that works towards ‘the condition of a selfhood forged through the work of looking’ (Lebeau 2009, 36).

### **Making Links**

The exploration that follows can be seen as an attempt to explain the ways in which a film can be used by the spectator to make links between her own experience and the representation on the screen. This process facilitates the possibility of finding a new way of seeing the world and, in the case of *Amour*, may even provide relief from the anxiety associated with aging and its potentially sinister consequences. In this section I am going to engage with the same dynamic of linking through explaining my decision to use Winnicott to understand Haneke.

A central tenet of psychoanalysis, the Winnicottian version included, is that the blueprint of adult experience is drawn in infancy. Since it is my intention to demonstrate the ways in which infant experience informs the mature activity of

watching a film, psychoanalytic thinking is an apposite choice. But, extending a set of theories to embrace an area for which they were not originally intended is not necessarily a simple slide. Winnicott was, after all, writing about the dyadic world of the mother and human infant as a way of clarifying the highly specialised dynamic between analysand and analyst. Phillips asserts, however, that, ‘It is important that we don’t read Winnicott too literally, don’t assume that when he is talking about mothers and infants, as he almost always is, that that is all he is talking about...he is also using mothers and babies to talk about other things as well’ (1988, ix). I hope to demonstrate that one of the ‘other things’ he can be interpreted as talking about is the relationship between the spectator and the film.

There is, however, one particularly challenging implication in this process of transposition that I wish to tackle before going any further. This revolves around the notion of a mutual response based on sensitive attunement to the other. In the mother/infant dyad bodies act on each other. A baby’s distress, for example, expressed through her body, stimulates a maternal response that is reflected in a change in body states for both parties leading, in favourable circumstances, to a calmer, more content baby and a fulfilled parent. The baby has had an impact on the mother and the mother has had an impact on the baby; as a result there has been a demonstrable change for both. How can a film that ostensibly remains unchanging in objective reality be understood to change? Whilst the truth of the unchanging, objective reality of the film cannot be denied, I would suggest, however, that the subject’s reception of a film does mean that it changes according to who is doing the looking and the state she is in whilst engaged in this activity. Winnicott writes that ‘projective mechanisms assist in the act of *noticing what is there*, but they are not *the reason why the object is there*’ (1971c, 121 original italics). This statement warrants further investigation as it helps us understand that, whilst the ‘change’ in a film is not an inherent quality in the film itself, from the subject’s point of view and, indeed, from subject to subject’s reception of the work, *Amour* is not simply an inflexible, rigid product of the maker’s mind.

When he speaks of ‘projective mechanisms’, Winnicott is referring to those processes whereby the subject ascribes qualities, both positive and negative, inherent in the self to the other. The nature of those projections will vary according to the idiosyncrasies of the subject that is doing the projecting, as the following two passages make clear. Evidently, both commentators have ‘noticed’ different things in *Amour* and, therefore, respond accordingly and in strikingly contrasting ways. For example, Richard Brody, writing in *The New Yorker*, opines:

...the director films his elderly couple with a superficial simulacrum of wisdom and experience, strips them of traits in order to reduce them to the function of the film to render the appalling act justifiable, to strip out the appearance of mixed emotions. And yet, what comes through is that Haneke likes filming a killing, takes a smirkingly ghoulish look at the act, and takes unconscious pleasure in the unconscionable (2013).

In contrast, Wheatley writes:

What Haneke gives us with *Amour* is a love story, one that is compassionate, powerful and intelligent, and that treats its protagonists and its audiences with respect. Coming from such a punitive director such unexpected kindness is blindsiding. It is also undeniably, immensely moving (2012).

Were these commentators watching the same film? Of course they were, yet, quite clearly, they noticed different things. Wheatley saw love; Brody saw nothing of the sort, seemingly feeling himself to be a hapless victim of the director's sadistic impulses. Wheatley was moved as Brody was angered. Thus, whilst a film, on one level, exists in objective reality as an unchanged, unchanging entity, on another level it is a plastic, flexible object that mutates according to the peculiarities of the spectator.

Whilst psychoanalysis might be an apposite theory to inform my approach, the contrasting voices of Haneke and Winnicott may appear a more contrary choice. Wheatley notices, regarding Haneke, that his 'works clearly present a problem for spectators in terms of how to respond to them 'grueling', 'punitive', 'aggressive'-these are terms frequently used to describe the films' (2009, 1). Whilst Kuhn, speaking of Winnicott, thinks that 'there is something pragmatic, kindly and accessible about his words that invokes in the reader or listener a sense of recognition and concurrence rather than a critical response or exegetical impulse' (2013, 1). There is truth in both statements. It is my sense, however, that there is also a commonality between the two men. Importantly, both put the recipient of their work into a space of creative doubt. This sense of doubt nudges the spectator/reader to come to their own understanding of what they are seeing or reading. Winnicott indicates his wish to maintain the autonomy of the reader thus, 'I will not try to press home my idea, but instead I will give some examples so the idea I am presenting can be worked over by the reader' (1971d, 152). This is reminiscent of Haneke's statement regarding his own work when he states that he 'provides a construct and nothing more - its interpretation and its integration into a value and belief system is always the work of the recipient' (2000, 171).

Thus an *environment* that invites the possibility of wondering is the result of both men's endeavour. In 'Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development' (1971d) Winnicott lists three activities that contribute to this facilitating environment, if engaged in with sensitivity. These are 'holding', 'handling' and 'object presenting'. He writes:

A baby is held, and handled satisfactorily, and with this taken for granted is presented with an object in such a way that the baby's legitimate experience of omnipotence is not violated. The result can be that the baby is able to use the object, and to feel as if this object is a subjective object and created by the baby (1971d, 150).

This can be linked to fruitful spectatorial experience by asking the following question: Does *Amour* allow and facilitate a process of personal making of meaning that is not

interrupted or impinged upon by the film maker's perceived wish to impose his own meaning on the spectator? I shall proceed by looking at *Amour*, using Winnicott's elements of holding, handling and object presenting to structure my argument.

### **Holding**

Bollas speaks of 'The uncanny pleasure of being *held* by a poem, a composition, a painting or, for that matter, any object, rests on these moments when the infant's internal world is partly given form by the mother since he cannot change them or link them together without her coverage' (1987, 32, my italics). Why 'uncanny'? I think that Bollas is suggesting, through his use of this word, that this 'pleasure' is both, and paradoxically, familiar and unfamiliar. It is the new context of adult cultural experience that renders it unfamiliar. The physical reverberations associated with being securely held have their roots in infancy; I am seeking to extend this idea and suggest that the mature experience of cultural engagement is the symbolic equivalent of this somatic phenomenon. Bollas goes on to say:

The search for the symbolic equivalents to...the experience-to remember not cognitively but existentially-through intense affective experience-a relationship which was identified with cumulative transformational experiences of the self with which it is identified continues in adult life...we go to the theatre, the museum...to the art gallery (1987, 17).

'Intense, affective experience' need not necessarily feel pleasant. Winnicott affirms 'that playing is always liable to become frightening' (1971e, 67). Feelings that threaten to disrupt the equilibrium of the inner world when playing are inherently unsafe. As a result, the infant/spectator needs the safety of feeling securely held in order to allow access to potentially frightening thoughts and the associated emotions. Since *Amour* portrays the inevitability of growing older and what may happen to our minds and bodies, it is likely to evoke challenging feelings in those that witness Anne's decline. In order to understand and confront such emotions I would argue that feeling safe through the agency of secure holding is an indispensable component of the experience.

A crucial factor that contributes to feeling safe in a potentially turbulent inner world hangs on, according to Winnicott, the capacity to be alone in a particular way. He explores the paradox of being alone whilst someone else is present in his 1958 paper 'The Capacity to be Alone'. He writes:

Although many types of experience go to the establishment of the capacity to be alone, there is one that is basic, and without a sufficiency of it the capacity to be alone does not come about; *this experience is that of being alone, as an infant and small child, in the presence of mother*. Thus the experience of being alone is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present (1958, 30, original italics).

Other commentators have noted the creative potential of the sense of being alone when someone else is present. Barthes, for example, articulates a similar feeling when he writes, 'To be with the one I love and think of something else; this is how I have my best ideas, how I best invent what is necessary for my work' (1975, 24).

Haneke, I believe, evokes this infantile experience through the figure of Georges in *Amour*. The assumption that I will be making here is that the relationship that the spectator may form with Georges has the quality of a 'relationship between two people, one of whom at any rate is alone...yet the presence of each is important to the other' (Winnicott 1958, 31). It *recalls* rather than *replicates* this original facilitating early encounter between care-giver and infant. Georges can be seen and felt as offering the spectator the sense of 'coverage' that Bollas speaks of above.

One aspect of 'coverage' is the sensitive attunement to the sways and swells of the infant's inner world. For example, a parent, sensing a potentially disturbing shift in a mood state might be moved to pre-empt the repercussions of such a shift by, if the infant is young, offering some kind of physical reassurance. She may also accompany her ministrations with words chosen to describe what she intuitively might be going on. Both responses pre-empt and therefore prepare the infant for a potential emotional onslaught. Daniel Stern has noted this parental function

I listened to the things we all say to a baby almost without thinking: 'Oh, you like that, huh?' 'You don't want the green one, after all?', 'OK, you're in a big rush, aren't you?' 'I'll hurry up'. All better now, isn't it? It is through such interpretations that you know what to do next, how to feel (1990, 5)

This is the parent acting as an auxiliary to the infant's thought processes; she is giving a shape, through words, to what she imagines may be going on in the infant's mind. Stern's examples of the parent functioning as a facilitator of language and thought, whilst important, are somewhat mundane. The function he is addressing is also at play, I believe, in more challenging emotional circumstances ('Its making you angry that I'm taking so long, isn't it?' or 'This might be a bit scary' would be examples of this more visceral role in child care). Over time, this reassurance can be internalised and a degree of self-help is possible. It is when this process of self-reassurance is possible, but not firmly rooted, that the actual presence of another is vital. Although this other presence may not be called on for help, the fact is that it *could* be.

Georges invites the spectator into a comparable relationship as the following episode shows. He is sharing the customary, companionable meal with his wife. He tells her a story from his childhood. His grandmother gave him the money to go to the cinema. The details of the film he saw are not important, his reaction to them is. He talks about re-telling the plot to an older boy, whom he is slightly scared of; this fear is exacerbated by his worry that he might re-experience the emotions stimulated by the film, with the consequent humiliation. He informs Anne that, when he came out of the

cinema, it took him some time to calm down. He is, I feel, not only talking to Anne at this point, but is also letting the spectator know that viewing a film is an emotional experience and that she could find herself in a similar situation to Georges as a child. How might the spectator hear this? I think she may hear a supportive parental voice preparing her for an emotionally challenging time. Georges also reminds the spectator through this conversation with Anne that the content of the film might not be its most memorable aspect. He cannot remember what the film was about but he can remember the emotion. He is acknowledging the power of the moving image to leave a psychic footprint that cannot be obliterated by time.

But Georges does not only explain, he also voices questions that may be on the spectator's mind, thereby offering her a sense of an empathic presence. This process is carefully managed. As Anne's incapacity increases the boundaries between Georges and the spectator become more porous. This progression begins when the spectator witnesses the sinister harbinger of Anne's decline during the first episode of mental absence at the breakfast table. Georges notices her fleeting departure from the world, as does the spectator, and he anxiously voices the question likely to be on the spectator's mind, asking his wife what the matter is.

When Anne arrives home after the first stroke, Georges puts her to bed and, in the course of his ministrations, asks her whether she would like a book. She says she would. He fetches it and hovers uneasily at her bedside, anxiously demonstrating that he may have the same question on his mind as many members of the audience (in the same way that he did when the initial symptoms of Anne's stroke revealed themselves over breakfast). He does not need to resort to words for the spectator to notice his anxiety. It is a shared moment of fearful wondering. Anne protests at being the object of his (and the spectator's?) worried gaze by reprimanding him, telling him not to stay and watch how she holds the book. He leaves, albeit reluctantly, the spectator remains. Due to this intimate shared moment the boundaries between Georges and the spectator have been momentarily blurred. If we take Winnicott's point seriously that in early development the baby experiences its omnipotence through a parentally managed sense of merging with the other, this small, yet significant, moment contributes to the feeling of being alone when someone else is present.

The next stage in this process takes place when Georges and Anne are eating together. She asks him to go and fetch their family photo albums. He finds them and then hovers as before. His demeanour may also echo the spectator's wondering about the motivation behind her request. She looks through the albums, gently remarking that life is beautiful. She then sharply asks her husband to stop observing her. He denies her accusation; she disagrees, adding that she is not that stupid yet. Her displeasure could also justifiably be directed at the spectator.

In the world of the film there are only two parties who have untrammelled access to Anne's decline: Georges and the spectator. This reaches its climax in the scene in which a nurse is showing Georges how to change Anne's nappy. The scene is shot from a stationary position at eye level and there is no shot/counter-shot dynamic.

This positioning means that the spectator is likely to assume that Georges is the recipient of the instruction. The stationary nature of the nappy changing shot allows a moment of creative doubt to creep into the spectator's mind: 'Who exactly is bearing witness to this painful sequence?'

The spectator never sees Georges watching, the possibility emerges that she, and only she, is the recipient of the lesson and yet he *could* be there. This is a disorienting representation of what it feels like to be alone in the presence of someone else. The spectator both observes the action from the outside and participates in the world of the film as Georges's diegetic companion. The boundaries between the self and the other are momentarily in doubt. This moment extends an invitation to the spectator to access a time in life when the reality of separateness is challenged. The presence of the other is allowed to seep through the seemingly unyielding barrier of the skin and she is truly alone in the presence of someone else.

In order to conclude this section, I would like to draw attention to the final scene of the film. Georges leaves the flat with Anne's ghost. There are then a series of long takes of the deserted flat that emphasises their departure. Their daughter arrives and then wanders slowly through the apartment. This is a telling and moving representation of the grey, grim experience of contemplating the loss of a parent and the physical evidence of their lives. I do not think it fanciful to suggest that, if one has experienced through Georges, the sense of being alone in the presence of someone else, the spectator will see her abandonment reflected in Eva, the daughter. It is not only her abandonment that we are witnessing but also her own.

### **Handling**

The parental tasks of holding and handling have much in common and, indeed, there is a grey area in which the two activities could be seen as overlapping. It is helpful to see holding as 'coverage', as Bollas terms it above. This denotes a more general sense of a facilitating environment. Handling, on the other hand, can be seen as a specific response to a specific need; whilst holding might create an atmosphere of care, handling maintains that atmosphere for the infant. The introductory quotation with which I opened this exploration makes it clear that anxiety is the predominant emotion that overshadows the early days of life. Similarly, the same emotion is at play for the spectator of *Amour* due to the disturbing nature of the subject matter.

In this section I shall focus on the way in which Haneke handles the spectator, as a symbolic equivalent of the parent of the anxiety bedeviled infant, so that she can manage the anxiety evoked by the subject matter. Undoubtedly, anxiety is not the only emotional state the spectator has to negotiate in the film; it is, however, one of the most pernicious with regard to spectatorial creativity and is therefore worthy of considered attention. More specifically, I shall show how Haneke performs a balancing act that gives the spectator access to her fears regarding the themes of mortality, physical dependency and illness whilst helping her to contain such feelings so that she is able to think about them and come to an understanding of their meaning

for her personally. This, as we will see, parallels the processes that the child engages with when playing. This is a way of saying that the director facilitates the mature spectatorial equivalent of childhood play.

Winnicott thinks that ‘there is a direct development ... from playing to shared playing and from this to cultural experience’ (1971e, 69). Characteristically, he does not specify the nature of this ‘direct development’ from playing to cultural experience. Tisseron suggests a possible link that clarifies the relationship between the two activities as follows, ‘The child learns to manage feelings...In playing the child chooses to let himself be invaded by intense feelings arising from situations that he knows full well are fictional...The adult cinema-goer does exactly the same’ (2013, 130). I shall look at two specific ways in which Haneke can be seen as handling the spectator in order that the ‘intense feelings’ of anxiety associated with the themes of the film become a fear made manageable.

Winnicott reminds us that ‘there is a degree of anxiety that is unbearable and this destroys playing’ (1971e, 70). One cinematic device that generates anxiety is to create suspense. If we reflect on the meaning of suspension, firstly it implies a sense of isolation. I have argued above that Georges functions to challenge the feeling of the spectator’s isolation. Secondly, one is usually suspended in or by something. This conveys the passivity and lack of agency in the state of suspension. In the context of filmic suspense, the moving image is doing something to the spectator over which she has no power. She can only be released from this state by the film itself. She therefore finds herself in a similar state to the baby who feels intruded upon by an external agent. The space that exists between the spectator and the film ‘may become filled with what is injected into it from someone other than the baby. It seems that whatever is in this space that comes from someone else is persecutory material, and the baby has no means of rejecting it’ (1971f, 137). As we will see, Haneke eschews the imprisonment of the spectator through the deployment of suspense and the anxiety it provokes.

Haneke works to release the spectator from the stasis of suspense firstly by ensuring that she has some knowledge of the future by making clear to her how the narrative will end. The film begins with the end story: Anne’s death. Moreover, there is rarely any build-up to Georges’s physical assaults on Anne. These appear to be sudden, spontaneous acts rather than premeditated. They are not founded on a dynamic of ‘Will he? Won’t he?’ Winnicott states that, in order to maintain the state of mind conducive to playing, it is important that ‘instinctual arousal is not excessive’ (1971e, 70). This ensures that ‘the capacity to contain experience’ (1971e, 70) is not compromised. The anxiety *Amour* generates confronts the spectator with herself and her own feelings about aging, not whether Georges will or will not kill his wife. This is an internalized form of suspense that is constellated around a dynamic of the possibility of it happening to the spectator herself. It therefore facilitates a relationship that, in Adorno’s words, invites the spectator ‘...not to lash outward but...reflect on oneself and whatever obdurate consciousness habitually rages against’ (1973, 101).

But it is not only through the rebuttal of suspense that Haneke demonstrates a capacity for thoughtful handling of his spectator. The spectator experiences his attentiveness in the disturbing scene in which Georges is attempting to make Anne take a few sips of water from a feeding beaker and she indicates her weariness with life by spitting the water out. He reacts by slapping Anne's face. After this episode there is a sequence of stills of paintings from the flat. The sequence of stills allows the spectator to gather herself after having borne witness to images that challenge the capacity to think. It also serves to remind her that she is watching a work of fiction. As Haneke makes clear, the sequence is a self-conscious structural device that he has deployed with spectatorial needs in mind. He says in one interview, 'Chacune de ces deux séquences intervient à un moment où dès l'écriture, j'ai senti d'avoir besoin de ce qu'on appelle en musique, une fermata, un peu d'air au film après une séquence si dure (Cieutat et Royer 2012, 310)<sup>i</sup>. The *fermata*, a term that denotes a period of rest after a particularly rousing moment in a musical score, offers the spectator time to integrate what she has seen into her internal world. Rather than being overwhelmed by emotion, she is offered a space to think about its resonances for her.

### **Object Presenting**

One happy outcome of the experience of the facilitating environment, according to Winnicott, is the ability to play. How might we transpose the childhood activity of play to the context of spectating? This section of the article seeks to link the infant's activity of playing with objects to the equivalent for the adult spectator. I shall look at an episode involving Georges and a stray pigeon to illustrate my point. Winnicott stresses the importance of play as a means of access to an authentic experience of the self as follows:

When alone in the sense that I am using the term...the infant is able to become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person with a direction of interest or movement...In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be a truly personal experience' (1958, 34).

*Amour* facilitates this process in the adult spectator through presenting her with objects, such as the pigeon, that have the potential to be invested with meaning through the agency of creative looking. Cieutat and Royer, in an interview with the director, pick up on a function of the pigeon as the following interchange illustrates:

La caresse qu'il prodigue à la main de sa femme, quand il lui raconte son souvenir de colonie de vacances, rappelle son geste avec le pigeon...

C'est Jean-Louis qui a eu l'idée de cette caresse. Moi, je lui avait simplement demandé de prendre la main d' Emmanuelle. Je pense d'ailleurs que n'est pas un idée à laquelle il avait pensé , ça lui est venu spontanément (2012, 314)<sup>ii</sup>

Clearly consciousness did not initially have a part to play in their linking of two episodes. I imagine that neither were looking or expecting to make a link. Their subjective experience would be likely to be one of it 'just happening'. They have built a bridge between these two images that offers form and meaning. In Winnicottian terms an object has been presented that they have noticed and then made something of it.

This is similar to the process Winnicott describes a young patient of his, the two and a half year old Edmund, engaged in during one consultation. At one point Edmund, 'began to liven up and he went to the other end of the room for a fresh supply of toys. Out of the muddle there he brought a tangle of string' (1971e, 57). In Winnicott's view, since Edmund's problem revolved around separation issues with his mother, the young patient had chosen the string due to its potential as 'a symbol of separateness and union through communication' (1971e, 57). Subsequent interaction would seem to support the validity of Winnicott's insight. Cieutat and Royer have engaged with a similar process, selecting a particular object from the 'muddle' that has the potential to be invested with personal meaning. It is important to point out that the object, whether the string or the pigeon, does not have an inherent, definitive meaning. The meaning varies according to whoever has noticed it.

There are, in fact, two scenes that involve Georges and the pigeon. The first is brief. A pigeon enters through an open window in their apartment. Georges comes into the hall and the pigeon leaves the way it came. This is an unusual event that is likely to remain in the spectator's mind. It may also leave the spectator wondering about the purpose of the scene. This wondering is the equivalent of the floundering Winnicott speaks of above. The second time the bird visits is likely to be met with a sense of recognition as Haneke has thoughtfully prepared the spectator for this lengthier encounter through familiarizing her with an alien object.

The second encounter takes place after Georges has killed Anne. I cannot presume to know the precise nature of the investment and consequent meaning the individual spectator might make in the object. For example, Cieutat and Royer above seem to have made a link between the pigeon and Georges's feelings about Anne. This could take them on a trajectory that might embrace the symbolism of the bird as it relates to these feelings. As we will see, my own 'floundering' took me on a very different path.

My engagement was influenced by an interview with Haneke for *Time Out* magazine. The interviewer voices a question that I imagine would be on many people's minds, 'Did you get any sense that it was difficult for Trintignant and Riva to create characters who were at or near death? I mean they are both over 80 — they are surely aware that the reality might not be far away?' (Calhoun 2012). The question demonstrates the fact that this commentator is very aware of the 'real' people and is exercised by their vulnerability, as he simultaneously watches the 'reel' person. In the

scene with the wayward pigeon Trintignant demonstrates a physical fragility that is commensurate with his 'real' age.

The question hovers: 'Is he performing fragility or is he incapable of doing it any other way?' We cannot answer this. It is in scenes such as this that the perception of what is 'reel' and the 'real' uncannily merge at the same time as being separate. This recalls Tisseron's notion above regarding childhood play that the child knows full well that they are engaged in a fictional world, as does the spectator. But the boundary between the fictional world and the real world is not as definitive as Tisseron's statement implies. Winnicott states that 'Playing is inherently exciting and precarious.

This characteristic derives *not* from instinctual arousal but from the precariousness that belongs to the interplay in the child's mind of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived' (1971e, 70). Whilst it might not be an identical process for the spectator, there is a certain commonality in the two experiences in terms of precariousness. The 'interplay' in this case can be seen in watching an old man acting as an old man. External world reality and the fictional reality of the film collide with each other maintaining a potentially creative doubt as the spectator works to locate the truth in the image.

The second encounter with the pigeon begins with Georges preparing the apartment for his departure after Anne's death. He is writing a letter. He stops short and looks up and down and listens. He (and the spectator) have heard something and both need to know what is going on. He leaves the kitchen and alights on the pigeon. He removes a cover from Anne's day bed and tries to trap the bird. He misses and the pigeon wanders into the hallway. This brings the tension of making a distinction between Georges and Jean-Louis Trintignant to the fore. Is Georges's physical difficulty a performance or a reality? Georges then follows the bird into the hallway, turning on the light and then, oddly, closing the window, thereby blocking the bird's only means of escape.

A sequence then follows in which Georges tries, unsuccessfully, to capture the bird on two successive occasions. His attempts to catch it demonstrate his age. He stoops, stumbles and looks increasingly fragile. In the same way that the child actor stimulates a doubt over the nature of performance (see Lury 2010, 145-189), we enter into this strange area of perception mentioned above. Is he *performing* physical fragility or *actually* fragile? The world outside the film intrudes at this point in the form of anxieties about the actor's physical competence. This continues when, on his third attempt, he successfully captures it. He fumbles with the blanket that covers the bird; he eventually locates it. He then, with great difficulty, crawls to a stool, cradling the creature in the blanket, and heaves himself on to it. He then sits holding it tenderly.

This episode with Georges/Trintignant and the pigeon provides a telling example of the way in which the spectator may select the objects from a film to play with. Whilst *Amour* demonstrably deals with the issues that relate to old age, the relationship between performing and being is an additional theme running through the

piece. The precariousness of the boundary between the two may stimulate a lively internal conversation. In Winnicottian terms there are any number of objects that the spectator might find ‘conveniently lying around’ (1971f, 130) that invite engagement along the same lines as Lury’s thinking about the child actor:

...they confuse or threaten the understanding of what acting or performing is, and how it can be distinguished from not-acting or from ‘being’. Child actors balance precariously on the divide between seeming and being, and they continually undermine the belief that while performing as an actor (playing a character) this performance is held-not necessarily securely but importantly-as distinct from the actor’s individual, everyday, off-screen performance of self’ (2010, 151).

This recalls Winnicott’s notion that a degree of precariousness is an inevitable element of the experience of play. I think this is because precariousness creates a lively state of mind within which the subject is never quite sure of her position regarding reality. One result of Haneke’s decision to use elderly actors is that the spectator is invited into this area that questions reality. Who exactly is she watching in the scene with the pigeon, Jean-Louis Trintignant or Georges?

### **Conclusion**

The psychoanalytic model of human development proposes that, rather than a linear progression in which one stage takes over from and replaces the preceding one; each developmental stage adds to rather than obliterates the previous one. On-going maturational change is predicated on the notion that the human subject never loses the dynamics associated with the infantile self. As she matures the primitive aspects of her personality structure remain but are built on, mediated, and transformed through subsequent experience.

Winnicott expresses it thus: ‘most of the processes that start up in early infancy are never fully established, and continue to be strengthened by the growth that continues in later childhood, and indeed in later life, even in old age’ (1963, 73-4). I have argued above that film in general and *Amour* in particular offers the opportunity for a continued engagement with this process of ongoing personal development through the provision of a symbolic equivalent to the care provided, in benign circumstances, by the original facilitating environment.

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### **Filmography**

*Amour*, 2012, Michael Haneke, France/Germany/Austria.

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<sup>i</sup> Both these sequences intervene at a moment when, because of the narrative, I felt the need to allow a breathing space, so to speak, after such a hard episode.

<sup>ii</sup> **The loving caress with which he touches his wife's hand when he is telling her about a memory of a summer camp, recalls his gesture with the pigeon.**

The caress was Jean-Louis' idea. I had simply asked him to take Emmanuelle's hand. I also think that he had not thought up the idea, it came to him spontaneously. (My translation).

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