

LES INTOUCHABLES THE INTOUCHABLES



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Bonsoir! *Welcome!*

This is a “feel-good” movie.

But I interrogate you: would you feel so good,

would you have watched this movie if it had been presented as a drama, or as a documentary?

Is humor acceptable because it allows us to dismiss our Super Ego, to allow condensation, displacement and unexpected projections and splitting, unleashing some aggressivity and erotic pleasures? To put in check some parts of the reality principle? And have some pleasure? As a display of some repressed inner feelings, somewhat like in dreams, admitted in the Pre-Conscious, unbearable in the Conscious level?

WHO IS PHILIPPE ?

Philippe is a well established, accomplished man. Wealthy and successful in all kinds of ways. He had gone through all stages of development, from oral satisfaction, anal control, phallic prowess and oedipal resolution.

He is able of trust, autonomy, industry, has a strong sense of identity, was able of intimacy and a long love story, and he is past generativity. He has a teenage girl.

His case is one of **Post-Oedipal Castration**.

His accident leaves him as a Bird in a golden cage, but he had been flying all around before.

His Super Ego is the stronghold. Philippe and his Ego functions, he manages his business, he maintains a social life.

He is respected. He has a lot of “helpers”, he is still in control. He is still powerful. But his basic drives are in custody.

He longs for a relationship, he writes these beautiful and lyrical letters to Eleonore, a perfect example of sublimation, one of his main mechanism of defense.

In the opening scene, Driss speeds up: to go where? Police comes in, the ultimate SuperEgo. Here Philippe plays out his own death, he suffocates. In a strange role reversal, Philippe saves Driss; on a larger scale, Driss attempts to save him. Driss concludes “*You let me handle it*”. Handle what?

At the end, we learn this is a true story.

Philippe obtains some respect, but also much distance, disdain, or simply pity. Philippe is brilliant, more than well-educated, incredibly rich. Defeated by his body, paraplegic with his full and beautiful mind. Archetypal of our worst somatic dreams...

Philippe is quite solid in judging people. His friend underlines the worry: “*In your state, be careful*”. But Philippe enjoys the lack of pity and the “real relationship” of joy and discovery that Driss opens. Hiring Driss is a fabulous

joke in itself.

Philippe is depleted narcissistically. In his new Body-Mind reality he is diminished. In *On Narcissism*, Freud pointed out how we are also constructed by the look of others. Philippe cannot stand pity, no more!

Freud had drawn our attention on Humor, as a specific mechanism of defense: it modifies the economy of the reality principle, the affective tonality. It offers the Ego a triumph, would it be modest, a pleasure. For Freud this was an intrapsychic work, a secondary process to satisfy the economy and spare the painful affects: suffering, disgust, horror, pity... Philippe obsessive compulsive traits are proficient, but remain MORTIFÈRES.

Driss is more like the ID, bringing in the economic fuel for Philippe's repressed paraplegic drives. He rediscovers the Maserati Quattroporte, he speeds up the wheel chair. Philippe is amused by his inhibitions, teases the earring. He provides him a structure, a private room, a bath, a job, offers his trust, a purpose. He seduces him, despite the mention of anal aspects (intestinal voiding, his long morning preparation). Philippe is never unleashed. He is given power to be, and gives some back to Driss, even some creativity.

Philippe' Super ego remains active: he states: STOP PLAYING! And incisively: he contests the loss of the *Fabergé* egg.

(Sometimes I wonder if this is not the reason why he hired him: to retrieve this gift from his beloved wife).

He enjoys how Driss handles the car owner who blocks the road, stamping the sign in his head, as a metaphor against all inhibitions to live again: do not block the exit!

We understand that his night panics are linked with phantom pains, as he breaks down at night. His love. After 5 miscarriages and her terminal illness. The adoption.

We are introduced to his manic defenses, to extreme sports, faster and higher, to "*piss on the world*". To counteract the illness of his wife. Now to suffer like Alice. Even when the pain eases, the thought remains. Philippe broke his neck, as a return of the repressed. His biggest handicap is not the chair, he was more deeply wounded to be without her. By the loss of her love.

This is a more intimate but cruel narcissistic blow. Installing him in Melancholia, where the repressed drives turn against oneself.

Until Driss: like *Friday* in Daniel Defoe's epic novel *Robinson Crusoe*, he provokes the explosion of the obsessive-compulsive order.

An inter-subjective connection is initiated. Philippe is an Intouchable, paraplegic. Driss is an Intouchable, socially. They reach for each other. Philippe is no more handled by efficient nurses...

When Driss understands the deep need of Philippe, and try to organize the first meeting, the latter becomes even more anxious, cannot get dressed, drinks one glass after the other. He leaves. Manic defenses come back: he goes higher, he goes flying. At this level, Driss is more anxious than Philippe.

We discover Driss' drama. His adoption, the family history. Philippe understands he has to let his companion go "set straight" the issues.

Philippe immediately becomes depressed, refuses to eat, to shave, isolates himself, he refuses the help and the helpers. The Super Ego cannot hold on. Night attacks recur with intensity. This psychic regression is worse than ever before. Mourning and Melancholia called our attention on the return of the Superego against the self. In *On Narcissism*, Freud

also states the depletion of the Psyche, in the image of the other. Not necessarily the exact double of the Self. In this situation, it is the spark of vitality that is the shared element.

Driss is the regressed, well repressed portions of Philippe's mind.

When Driss says "*You let me handle it*", it is more than a ride, a shave, he confronts the suicidal wish ("*a quiet cut could settle it*"). He understands the despair and its roots. He allows the libido to flow again. Philippe is depicted in many ways, as a repressed person, as a sophisticated one, even as Hitler, when he reacts strongly refusing this sinister character that personifies racism and the death of so many, including handicapped people.

Philippe is left to himself... with Eleonore. With a chance to be loved. You know the end. He remarried, had 3 children. Driss was successful here,

Driss was able to engineer the most important reparation of the Self. Allow Love to flourish again. Allow this intimate partnership to live again. The strength of their friendship is another reason of the title: Les Intouchables.

Philippe remained generous as 5% of the movie profits are sent back to an association for handicapped.

He intervenes towards his daughter. In French, the word "recadrage" is used: this is the exact wording for CBT.

***The Perspective of Driss in The Intouchables,
a film by Eric Toledano & Olivier Nakache***

Thoughts on learning to love amongst men

Robert A.W. Northey

Dr. Gagnon introduced me to this wonderful film, *The Intouchables*, once we had agreed to do a split presentation for this year's series around comedy. In our division of labour, I have the pleasure of examining Driss' situation, and providing my perspective of how he is affected by his relationship with Philippe, and the household. This film most closely represents a very basic definition of comedy, a story that has a happy ending, counter to those typical of tragedy. The situation portrayed in the film is quite serious, yet the writers have sought to provide a humorous perspective, effective in telling this particular story.

With my focus on Driss, it became clear to me that he undergoes a very significant and essential transformation due to his relationship with Philippe. I also associate to thoughts about the Oedipus Complex in the heterosexual male, more particularly the importance of the negative Oedipus situation in its role of shaping male friendships, one's identity as a man, and its influence on fatherhood. Freud postulated that boys fall into a love affair with their mother, though there are limits from the incest taboo as well as fear of castration by the father; to resolve the castration anxiety, the boy gives up the mother in favour of identification with the father (typically shaping the superego). But Freud went further, postulating a simultaneous love affair with the father, in competition with the mother, this too needing resolution. A good enough traversing of this developmental stage fosters healthy relating as an adult, particularly in romantic relationships and friendships, while difficulties lend themselves to developing neurotic conflicts. More later.

The opening scene is a preview of the end, and initially it is misleading. The music is somewhat ominous, and the filming suggests an emergency, or a getaway. But the betting between the two men, the pair fooling the police, and Driss changing the music to the lively funk song, shifts our – the audience's – perspective and mood. Immediately the filmmakers signal an important message to us: to be cautious making assumptions based on the first impressions. The scene is so important symbolically that it is repeated toward the end of the film.

Moving back in time to the beginning of the story, Driss stands out among the applicants for the caregiver position. While the other candidates provide their pat, favour-seeking answers to the interview questions, Driss puts on no airs. He fully expects to be rejected, even desires this, so that he may collect state benefits for the unemployed. This can be viewed as a repetition compulsion, putting himself in the position of rejection by the father, the reward of welfare a defensive mitigation to the pain of not being considered as belonging. We learn much later that Driss was the eldest child in his family, but being the first heir to his

father did not prevent him being given to his childless aunt and uncle; one can imagine the unconscious message, that his parents, particularly his father, did not adore and desire him enough to want to keep him.

So why do I emphasize the negative Oedipus as a primary issue for Driss? Pre-oedipal issues often include fundamental struggles with identity such as complete identity diffusion in some psychoses, or the pathological insecurity of narcissism. Driss is very secure in his personality, with a solid sense of who he is, and willing to project this in the world and prepared to be accepted or not. In terms of his positive oedipus, he is also comfortable with his sexual identity with women, understanding that he is attractive and willing to express his libidinous nature quite freely. From the very start Driss flirts with Magalie, pursues her despite her rejections, possibly slightly embarrassed when she teases him but never feeling shame for expressing his masculinity. He is also comfortable helping Yvonne explore some of her sexuality. And, most importantly to the story, he never assumes Philippe lacks sexuality and encourages him to explore and express it.

Driss' anxieties do become apparent as he begins Philippe's physical care. The first signal of anxiety is when he must lift Philippe from the bed to the chair, hesitating as he needs to embrace Philippe to do this, and then withdrawing so quickly that Philippe almost topples over; we could dismiss this as inexperience but the turning away is more from the anxiety than the invalid. The intimacy of washing Philippe leads to confusion about the cleaning products. To even consider dressing Philippe with the support stockings threatens his own masculinity in his identification with his client. Note that Philippe teases Driss, "You're good with stockings. Only natural with that cute earring. You're a natural at this. Have you ever considered work as a beautician?". And finally, when Driss realizes Philippe requires his rectum to be evacuated as part of care, he absolutely refuses, the anxiety clearly related to the sexual meaning of the anus rather than its digestive function.

However, within a short period Driss is engaged within the household routine; one might hypothesize that Driss is able to rely on his masculine identity to do his duties – and in doing so, to conquer Philippe's challenge to him – suppressing his homosexual anxiety, to connect to the pragmatics of Philippe's reality. In feeling part of this constructed family, he also becomes protective, aggressively insisting the neighbour move his car from blocking the driveway, and intimidating Elisa's boyfriend after calling her a slut.

But Driss does not simply further repress conflicts by relying on his masculine identity; he evolves, allowing his experiences in the household to change him, working through some of his conflicts. Driss tries his

hand at painting, exploring a creative aspect which one might reasonably argue is allowing expression of a feminine aspect within. When Philippe takes him paragliding, rather than putting on a stereotyped bravado, he openly protests and screams his fear, allowing a child-like exhilaration. Driss' evolution is very apparent by the time he leaves the household to help his own family. When again a neighbour is blocking the driveway, Driss assertively asks the neighbour to move his car, appealing to the man's compassion rather than using aggression to frighten him into better behaviour. Though we do not hear what Driss says to the gangsters who have threatened Adama, we do see that he does not use violence. In the interview with the delivery company he puts the woman at ease by commenting on the art, though he still engages in his flirtatious manner.

Most important to the change in Driss is in his relationship with Philippe. At the beginning Driss is somewhat antagonistic, with an expectation that he will not be allowed in this elite and restricted part of society. Truly the unwanted immigrant in a strange land. Even when Philippe invites him in, it is within the frame of a competitive challenge, where if he does not prove himself as a man, Driss will quickly be cast out. Driss' expectation of Philippe is the repetition of being given up by the father, sent into the aunt's world where he ultimately is not wanted. By the time Driss leaves the household Philippe no longer symbolizes the unreachable or rejecting father. Driss is able to appreciate Philippe's vulnerability, his weaknesses, without ever denying Philippe's power and potential, and, as such, can experience Philippe's acceptance of him. In the evolution to experiencing the entirety of the man, Driss can identify with the more vulnerable side and allow it in himself, thus opening his capacity to love, not just as a dominant [hetero]sexual man, but also a man able to submit to the warmth and tenderness of friendship. Further, once open to his own tender side that wishes to be fully loved, he can have empathy for Philippe's desire for the same, the motivation for insisting on the meeting with Eleonore at the end.

That Driss changes is clear, and I wish to say some words that may allow the change, namely the space for fantasy and play. Play in the oedipal period has been discussed as partly defensive, a space to work through conflicts in a symbolic way, and in this sense it represents a single mind function. However, in the scenario of the film both men participate in the space of play. Driss wants to play with the expensive sports sedan, and Philippe foregoes practicality in allowing it. Laughter is shared at the opera, Philippe enjoying Driss' perspective. While Driss begins his painting in isolation, Philippe broadens the play by selling this "new" artist to his snooty friend. The father enters the son's space of play without taking command,

participating without dictating the rules, which – I submit – is the love affair of the negative oedipus which softens the more severe father of the positive oedipus who would insist that the son join him. I will note that through the process of play, Driss is more open to Philippe's vulnerability and pain (of his wife's death) and fear of seeking another relationship. More importantly, Driss is able to share his own trauma, possibly the first time he has ever spoken it outloud to anyone.

This space of play is where we find the most humour in this story, why it maybe works better as a comedy as opposed to a drama. There is a dramatic end to the film, when Driss leaves the household, but the story is incomplete. Despair follows that ending, so Driss must return, which leads to the repeat of the scene from the beginning of the film, the car chase. As the audience, seeing the events a second time we are privy to much more depth; we now have a sense of how much this event symbolizes the coming together of such different men, joining together in play. Had the film ended here, it would be a comedic ending, more of the slapstick variety. The fact that it goes on leads to a true ending of the film: the movie has ended, happily, as a comedy, but the story of the friendship of these two men continues on.

Stephen Hawking in a New York Times interview paraphrased many before him in saying “Life would be tragic if it weren't so funny”. Tragedy in life is inevitable, which we must accept; comedy can open us to everything else about life and make it worth living.