

Endgame: Love, Conflict and Interest in Michael Haneke's *Amour*

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La critique considère Amour (2012) comme le plus tendre et le plus personnel des films réalisés jusqu'à maintenant par Haneke. Si, du Septième Continent (1989) au Ruban Blanc (2010), la violence humaine, la faiblesse, et la cruauté formaient la matière des films de ce réalisateur, Amour apporte une dimension de compassion qui représente pour beaucoup un tournant bienvenu dans l'œuvre du cinéaste.

Cette étude se propose d'explorer le dialogue qu'Haneke entretient avec le naturalisme et de montrer que la compassion est moins chez ce réalisateur un élément nouveau qu'une prémisse fondamentale d'ordre humaniste. Toutefois, la présence de cette qualité ne saurait nous tromper; dans le huis clos de l'appartement bourgeois des Laurent, l'"œil de faucon" du metteur en scène naturaliste ne perd jamais de son acuité quand il s'agit d'exposer les forces cachées qui déterminent la dynamique complexe de la psychologie des personnages confrontés au déclin et à la mort. À partir de l'analyse des trois membres de la famille, nous démontrerons que la puissance du film réside dans l'exposition naturaliste de la tension entre l'amour pour l'autre et les intérêts personnels qui sont à la base des relations humaines.

The films of Michael Haneke have prompted a large body of academic criticism because they offer an exceptionally wide range of approaches, from philosophy to aesthetics to history. By schooling and taste, Haneke is a modernist who, while engaging the tradition with postmodern reflexivity, remains consciously concerned with the great issues of modernity: violence, alienation, communication, repression. In this sense, Haneke's cinematic approach is anachronistic. His films are concerned with the central problems of modernity as he thematically and stylistically re-engages distinctive features of modern philosophy and aesthetics.¹ It is surprising, therefore, that Haneke's affinity with some of the major tenets of classical nineteenth-century naturalism has not yet received attention in critical discussion. One of the reasons may be that Haneke, in his many interviews, readily affirms cinematic realism while rejecting what he calls "false naturalism," which reconstructs a sensational make-believe reality that, devoid of depth and psychological complexity, naturally appeals to mass audiences.² Indeed, naturalism, with its claims of scientific objectivity, biological determinism, and its negative view of the human being, in contrast to its larger, looser, less dogmatic sibling realism, is too narrow a frame to do justice to the complexity of Haneke's ideas about reality and life. This was also the case, however, for the original naturalist writers of the nineteenth century, its chief representative Émile Zola included, whose

¹ See Roy Grundmann, "Haneke's Anachronism," in *A Companion to Michael Haneke* (Malden, USA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2010) 1-50.

² Franz Grabner, "We Live in a Permanent State of War: An Interview with Michael Haneke," in *Fascinatingly Disturbing. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Michael Haneke*, eds. Alexander D. Ornella and Stefanie Knauss (Eugene, USA: Pickwick Publications, 2010) 26.

stretching of the limitations of their self-imposed doctrine was crucial to the pursuit of truth and, ultimately, in their success.³ For the sake of truth, which is the common thread of realism and naturalism, they had recourse to imaginative elements such as poetry, symbols, nightmares and premonitions. Haneke also stretches the limits of naturalism in terms of psychology, which he employs in the creation of realistic characters. The human being is not only a biological organism, a predictable machine, but, as Friedrich Nietzsche always stressed, also a creative creature with a tricky mind, with an intellect that it uses chiefly to support the illusion of being above nature.

The theme of *Amour*, the strength of its characters, and its mostly sentimental reception clearly invite a consideration of Haneke's affinity with naturalism and of his use of naturalist techniques insofar as they constitute the greater part of his realist and pitiless outlook on the world. For Haneke, above all, art must be in the pursuit of truth, and this fundamental stance he shares with the philosophical and aesthetic naturalism of the nineteenth century. His painstaking attention to form, that is, his manipulation of the image, structuring of action, attention to detail, and emphasis on dialogue, exposes the true, real, disturbing content that lies beneath the obvious. In his universe, devoid of transcendental forces, people are still determined by nature, ruled by instincts, constrained by circumstances, however creatively they may talk, think, believe, and pretend the contrary. In *Amour*, Haneke displays this truth with deliberate cinematic artistry.

In this essay, I explore how Haneke's dialogue with naturalism brings to light all the hidden forces that stir under the surface of everyday consciousness. Introducing Haneke's cinematic program first, I then focus on the power dynamics among the Laurents, a typical urban, bourgeois family steeped in the conventions of their class and absorbed by their interests, a family suddenly confronted by an unanticipated crisis. The irruption of disease sets into motion a struggle between the three members of the family, exposing the underlying character and temperament of each individual and making visible the latent conflicts in their relationships. I argue here that the dynamic between the couple themselves and with their daughter Eva, which has not received sufficient critical attention, is the nexus of the film.

Philosophically, thematically, and aesthetically, Haneke's films inscribe themselves in the larger project of a humanism that seeks to impact and engage the viewer's reflection at a time characterized by distraction-overkill through technology and diminished exposure to real life experiences involving productive danger. His films challenge our numbness to life, all too often approached with a moral relativism that fosters a false sense of comfort while breeding indifference. Like the best of naturalist novelists, Haneke tells harrowing stories because "we shut our eyes to the horrors of reality in order to endure them in the first place."⁴ We instinctively hide from ourselves and from others the truths that are too hard to confront: "Suppression is the original sin both in social and individual terms – we are all powerless against it."⁵ As he often stresses, Haneke's business is to shock the moviegoer into awareness, laying bare the complex reasons for and the mechanisms by which humans weave their veil of illusion, out of the necessity to survive in an uncertain world in which they have to cope. The lure of a Haneke film is the guarantee of a powerful experience presented on a universal and timely level, in which we are sure to discover something new about ourselves. His films presuppose a willingness and capacity for introspection and for taking up the challenge of balancing identification and critical distance. There is in all of Haneke's films an imperative to deal with a crisis, to make choices

³ Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine, *Naturalism* (London: Methuen, 1971) 54.

⁴ Grabner 15.

⁵ Grabner 15.

one would rather not have to make. Those choices are limited by our nature and circumstances, which we may come to understand but over which we have little control. Like Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola, the film targets the contemporary professional middle class whose corrupt values and codes he exposes, each time with a life-truth and a current issue. For instance, in *Funny Games*, the truth is that safety is an illusion and the topic is the violence of home invasion. In *Caché*, the truth is that the past cannot be suppressed; the topic is surveillance and bourgeois hypocrisy. In *Amour*, the truth is that death is part of life; the topic is the painful loss of a loved one.

In *Amour*, Haneke is especially timely. Like Zola in his urban novels, where he mirrors the characteristics of his time and the concerns of his readers, Haneke targets the fear of the middle class baby boomer generation (1946-1964). The Laurents' ordeal illustrates what most fifty-something viewers are dreading at this point of their lives: the end of their parents' vitality, illness, loss of a primal connection that in spite of some dysfunctionality provided a sense of belonging, safety, and continuity. It addresses also the dread that, in terms of time, we are certainly now next in line. The Laurents' daughter Eva, torn between filial duty and personal interest, embodies this predicament in all its complexity. For many viewers, particularly of Eva's generation, the film cuts too close to home.⁶ They did not wish to be exposed to a situation they will find themselves confronted with soon enough.⁷ Indeed, as Anna Gural-Migdal has pointed out, Haneke "sets up an ethics of the gaze, since the spectator is forced to consider his or her own position as a voyeur [...]"⁸ and we might add as a target. In *Amour*, the spectator finds herself an unwelcome guest in an increasingly suffocating *huis-clos* where, through the "mnemonic power of [Haneke's] image,"⁹ the barrier between art and life becomes uncomfortably thin. Although the viewer's anxiety may be of a future situation, the intensity of Haneke's imagery insures that it is felt during the viewing, and not forgotten afterward.

Stylistically, the strength of the film lies in Haneke's ability to strike a balance between the classical and modern, between the philosophical and the psychological, between the physiological and the spiritual. The formal structure of *Amour* is circular, classical; the beginning contains the end. The violent intrusion at the beginning of the firemen into the apartment to discover Anne's corpse parallels Eva's final homecoming, at the conclusion of the film, suggesting repetition and continuation of the natural cycle of life and death as it has been and ever will be. The last medium long shot of their daughter Eva's profile, as she sits small and forlorn in the big empty living room of the apartment she has coveted ever since she left it to lead her own life, is reminiscent of her mother's profile that we see throughout the film, suggesting a similar future for Eva in the same apartment. However, this circular structure, which underscores the idea of death as an integral feature of life, is complemented by Haneke's timely problematization of contemporary debates and attitudes which perceive death as the enemy to be conquered. It is possible to read *Amour* as an illustration of Michel de Certeau's assertion that the dying person presents the ultimate challenge in today's efficiency-driven world because death represents the "lapse of this discourse."¹⁰ Anne, as the authority figure in the film, a successful piano teacher

⁶ From discussions about the film with many people in the US and in Europe.

⁷ See Francine Prose, "A Masterpiece You Might Not Want To See," *New York Review of Books Blog*, January 2013. Web. 30 Oct. 2015 <<http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jan/07/haneke-film-not-to-see/>>.

⁸ Anna Gural-Migdal and Romain Chareyron, "The 'ghost image' of horror and pornography in Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste*" (2001)," *Studies in French Cinema* 11.1 (2011): 58.

⁹ Gural-Migdal and Chareyron 58.

¹⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, 1984) 190.

venerated by her pupil, beloved and commanding wife and mother, fears the horror of being institutionalized, marginalized, put away, out of sight and at the mercy of a medical system indifferent to personal dignity. In *Amour*, the stoic acceptance of fate, as exemplified by Anne's iron will to die at home once she knows there is no exit, is contrasted by Georges's initial hope in medical help and his sense of order and duty.

Many consider *Amour* Michael Haneke's finest film to date, partly because for the first time the director shows compassion.¹¹ However, compassion is not an exception in this particular film but a fundamental attitude that Haneke claims to have for his characters in all his films:

When you write something, you have to protect your characters, be their advocate [...]. A character must be interesting, but a total idiot or a shit isn't interesting. So I've always tried to show compassion for the people in my films, and give them some aspect that's fascinating or, at the very least, amusing. Shakespeare's Richard III may be a monster, but he's a very intelligent monster...¹²

In *Amour*, with its formidable monsters Anne and Georges Laurent, compassion is achieved by the inclusion of Haneke's personal history, his admiration and respect for the main actors and perhaps also by the viewer's emotional projection.¹³ Overwhelmed by an ingenious casting of stellar actors whose celebrity, iconic power, and age project veracity, immediacy, and urgency, the audience cannot stay unmoved. Here, as usually is the case in a Haneke film, the "star functions [also] as an emotional hook, since the spectator's familiarity with the star gives rise to an emotional attachment which exists outside of any diegetic characterization."¹⁴ The sympathy or indignation that they elicit in the film, however, should not deceive us about the fact that here, more so perhaps than in other films, Haneke dissects just as rigorously what Baudelaire called "the banal canvas of our pitiful fate."¹⁵ The affinity with Baudelaire's dualism is contained in Haneke's statement that he holds within him both his "perpetrators and the victims."¹⁶ In *Amour*, compassion transpires precisely through Haneke's refusal to romanticize and to represent suffering as a means to a higher cause (platonic, Christian). Suffering is the stuff of this one life, to be situated on the Nietzschean human-all-too human level, a condition, that when mastered enhances life as a whole.

In their capacity to endure and handle the fear and pain coming with Anne's death sentence, Anne and Georges Laurent both display a monstrous dimension, which is also a feature of the naturalist aesthetic. They are monsters in the etymological sense, demonstrating the fatal and brutal mark of illness and age. They are monsters in the psychological sense, in the strength of

¹¹ See Luisa Zielinski, "The Art of Screenwriting 5: Michael Haneke (Interview)," *The Paris Review* 211 (Winter 2014). Web. 15 May 2015 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6354/the-art-of-screenwriting-no-5-michael-haneke>>.

¹² Andrew Geoff, "Michael Haneke (Interview)," *Sight and Sound* 22.12 (Dec. 2012): 54-58.

¹³ See Geoff and Michel Cieutat and Philippe Rouyer, *Haneke par Haneke* (Paris: Stock, 2012) 299-322. In these interviews Haneke lists the personal, realistic elements: his aunt's suicide; the Laurents' apartment, a replica of his parents' place in Vienna; Georges's stories are based on Haneke's own; Georges's deprecating report of a funeral is based on Haneke's father's funeral. Haneke chose Jean-Louis Trintignant for his destabilizing gaze, voice, and overall mystery; Emmanuelle Riva for her work in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*, her beauty in age, and her willingness to do on-screen nudity.

¹⁴ Catherine Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema. The Ethic of the Image* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009) 127.

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, "To The Reader," *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (London: Oxford University Press, 2008) 5.

¹⁶ Zielinski 8.

their individual characters and their struggle with natural forces and with each other as a couple and as parents. They are monsters in the naturalistic sense, as Anne's body transforms into a grotesque object no longer the body that Georges loved, and which he displays artfully, after killing it, then leaves to decompose. Haneke himself is monstrous in serving up this enormity to the viewer. The theme of monstrosity appears early in the film in a seminal scene. After her stroke, in the initial phase of the couple's adjustment to their situation, Georges, an introvert, reserved and laconic, tells Anne a story she has never heard. Sitting in their kitchen having lunch, he reveals a sensitivity and vulnerability that seems new to Anne who is quick to pick up on it. In a playful, teasing tone she dares him to ruin his image in old age. Georges, grinning, refuses but wonders with a smirk what his image is. Anne has the answer ready: "Sometimes you're a monster. But you're nice." Georges instinctively reverts to the role of the skillful seducer, a sincere move but also a trick he employs to distract from a possible conflict: "Can I take you for a drink?" Anne, accepting the truce, giggles like a girl.¹⁷ There is more to Georges than meets the eye; and, while Anne holds the secret, the audience speculates what, in their shared past and now, makes Georges a monster. This exchange is paradigmatic of the couple's dynamic. Roy Grundmann rightly points out that these conversations between Anne and Georges exhibit still a little romantic "spark – and a little mystery – between them."¹⁸ They reveal complicity based on knowledge and acceptance of the other's idiosyncrasies. I argue they also suggest unspoken, life-long differences in temperament and interests, intensified here by the stress of Anne's inexorable decline, in the course of which both do monstrous things. There is also more to Anne than meets the eye, for in this scene, she cunningly prepares "nice" Georges for their ordeal and the monstrous act to which she ultimately commits him.

The Laurents, as representatives of the high-cultured branch of the Parisian bourgeoisie, are professionals at cultivating the surface, playing the game of codes and conventions while grappling underneath with fear and dread. In Georges's artful manipulation of conversation, his preference for indirect over direct communication; and in his eventual abandonment of these conventions, we are confronted with the Nietzschean paradox of Truth and Lie: codes, conventions, metaphors, and "lies" are necessary for social survival and creative self-expression – affirmation and protection. As gatekeepers of truth these linguistic and behavioral codes most importantly enable fundamental self-deception until, inevitably, catastrophe (truth) hits. In *Amour*, the word death is never pronounced: "Nothing can be said in a place where nothing more can be done."¹⁹ The truth, which every member of the family knows, remains locked within each under the surface of language, role-play, and behavioral tactics. Now, the strength and style of character of an individual, according to Nietzsche, are measured by one's ability to recognize and stay aware of the artificiality and ethical limitations of codes and conventions in the face of necessity and truth.²⁰ From this point of view, Georges, compelled and guided by Anne's will power, exhibits a certain modern heroism in maintaining the code as long as possible and then transgressing it because it has outlived its usefulness. What cannot be said has to be done, and then the torch is handed over to the next generation.

¹⁷ Michael Haneke, *Amour*, Screenplay pdf (2012) 25. Web. 30 Oct. 2015 <http://www.sonyclassics.com/awards-information/amour_screenplay.pdf: 25>.

¹⁸ Roy Grundmann, "Show Your Love: Love, Death, Truth-Amour," *Senses of Cinema* 65 (Dec. 2012): 17.

¹⁹ Certeau 190.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin, 1977) 42-47.

Haneke's treatment of the couple's struggle is all the more effective since it operates on two levels. The inexorable evolution of Anne's decline, Georges's efforts to provide palliative care, and the elaborate décor are presented realistically with a naturalist attention to clinical details, including the tedium of daily chores, hygiene, feeding, physical therapy, and progressive physical and psychological deterioration. Yet at the same time, by including in the film structural, stylistic elements such as the prologue and epilogue, the nightmare scene, symbolism – for instance the pigeon and, of course, the music –, Haneke departs from this clinical naturalism to point towards the spiritual reality of love under stress. His affinity with naturalism as materialistic doctrine that grounds humans in biology is undeniable in *Amour*. Every detail of Anne's physical and mental disintegration has been meticulously researched.²¹ However, he defends himself against "a false naturalism," which reconstructs, as in bad TV films, one-dimensional, "as if" blood-and-spatter "realities." In *Amour*, Haneke alternates between the clinical and the symbolic, a strategy which underscores the realism of the situation. For instance, to alleviate the oppressiveness of a particularly stressful sequence, he interjects two static shots that function as ellipses, allowing a short reprieve from the narrative action, providing time for reflection: the first is a series of shots of the empty apartment the night of Anne's hospitalization, foreshadowing the definitive absence of the couple at the end of the film; the second, the panning of a series of naturalistic landscape paintings hanging in the apartment, follows right after Georges has slapped his wife. Like George, we are drained of energy and welcome the calm of landscapes with their open horizons counteracting the crisis taking place in the entropic huis-clos. These moments of reprieve put into relief Haneke's chief interest here, namely to show how the physiological conditions the "inner conflicts that result from the suffering of someone one loves."²²

The first truth forcefully hitting the unsuspecting viewer is that, within seconds, life can change forever. All efforts to keep catastrophe at bay are vain. Anne and Georges come home to their comfortable apartment from a pleasant concert given by Anne's best student from years back. As they discover an attempted break-in, they do not know that a far more terrible event is about to happen. Haneke prepares his strike carefully. As the couple debates what to do at this late hour, Anne playfully muses: "Imagine if we were here, in our beds, and someone broke in?" Georges rejects such ideas. Ever the rational man, he believes that things can be done to ensure safety. Yet Anne insists: "But it's terrible! I think I'd die of fright." Leveling, Georges admits with a laugh that he would too.²³

This short interlude foreshadows the tragedy that unfolds the next morning when Anne suffers the first of two strokes that force the couple to face and suffer the end of the music that was their life.²⁴ What seems to be an insignificant detail becomes in hindsight a symbolic event: the enemy is not only within the walls but already within Anne's body. As Garrett Stewart points out, in *Amour*, the violence is from the start biological, "not the violence erupting at any moment within life, but the definitive violence of life: its brutal foreclosure in death."²⁵ The futility of Georges's phone call to the locksmith is all the more ironic as the stroke hits almost immediately after the reassuring news of imminent restoration of safety. We witness the couple at breakfast in their lived-in kitchen as usual, in their old robes and slippers. While Anne is

²¹ Geoff 2.

²² Cieutat and Rouyer 303.

²³ *Amour*, Screenplay 5.

²⁴ Geoff 3. Originally, Haneke considered the title *The Music Stops*. The constant interruption of the music *in medias res* signifies the characters' consciousness of the end of a lifetime together, the pain at imminent loss.

²⁵ Garrett Stewart, "Haneke's Endgame," *Film Quarterly* 67.1 (Fall 2013): 14.

getting the soft-boiled eggs, Georges, hanging up the phone, smugly announces that his handyman is a “dependable guy,” unlike professional locksmiths who make you wait for weeks.²⁶ Anne undercuts him, as she does repeatedly later on, saying that last time they had to wait for him for ages. Georges, realizing that the saltshaker is empty, gets up after a pause (he expects Anne do this), and fills it himself. Returning to the table, he finds Anne frozen and unresponsive. The close-up of Anne’s face, with Georges’s hands holding it, underscores the centrality of her persona, and reads like a landscape of lived life, confusion, and loss. Its hardened lines translate an imposing temperament. Her first stroke lasts a full three minutes, not long enough for the frightened Georges, who leaves the faucet running, to get outside help. While the battle of wills begins after Anne’s return from the hospital, paralyzed and chained to a wheelchair, it is already present as husband and wife try to make sense of what just happened. Upon returning to the kitchen (the water has stopped running – so Anne is back in reality), Georges accuses Anne of playing a not-so-funny game, while Anne, confused by his harsh tone, demands to know what is going on. Both are at a loss to explain the other’s behavior. When it dawns on Georges that something serious is going on and that she really is unaware, he hides his panic by reverting to his usual logic of methodical inquiry, leading Anne, step by step to understand and to accept the obvious. He insists on immediate medical attention, which Anne refuses. It becomes clear that Anne is annoyed at this pattern of interaction, a kind of cat and mouse game married people play, in which she wants to keep the upper hand as she usually does. The more evidence Georges gathers, the more stubbornly Anne takes refuge in denial, stopping the conversation, accusing Georges of emotional torture, demanding to be left alone in a tone that allows no retort. Sadly, no retort is necessary. He will not be able to leave her alone again. Her valiant effort to keep the truth at bay, pretending “that nothing happened,” is shattered by the bitter truth immediately thereafter when she fails at refilling her cup. This mundane kitchen scene exposes the pattern of the longstanding power dynamics of the old couple sharing love yet also locked in a battle of wills that takes place within themselves, with each other, and together against the world. This scene also, like the monster scene, shows the tension in the lives of these people between conventional surface and disturbing depth. To see here only devotion and care would miss the point. While these qualities are present, they are not all that is in play. Within the terms of the family dynamic, George undertakes to assert himself, but the real power in the relationship is, and seems always to have been, Anne’s will. Haneke, in naturalist fashion, deliberately undercuts a sentimentalized reading of the couple’s relationship.

When Anne returns from the hospital the doors close forever on the world outside. Anne demands from George, in the same cutting tone as in the kitchen, a promise he cannot refuse. George refrains from verbally agreeing to never take Anne back to the hospital, but he complies progressively with her demand. Her unilateral and categorical decision to die at home puts a deadly burden on Georges, whose own will, by respecting hers, becomes conflicted, strained, and finally as inflexible as hers. Paradoxically, the deterioration of Anne’s condition and the failure of the first surgery strengthen Georges’s resolve to protect their secret and to go to the end together. His monstrous dimension emerges ironically in his strict and formal administration of Anne’s care. Anne’s physical weakness gives Georges an authority he has never held before, which he exercises on Anne’s behalf, but also on his own. His killing of Anne fulfills her wish to die, but it also is, as Roy Grundmann argues, “selfishness incarnate.” Grundmann’s locating Georges’s selfishness in a chivalrous, creative re-appropriation of Anne as “idealized image,” interpreting

²⁶ *Amour*, Screenplay 6.

the act of killing as “akin to a crime of passion,” and a last sex act, is plausible.²⁷ However, I see Georges’s selfishness in terms of basic human self-interest. Anne’s disease and demand contribute to a strengthening of Georges’s character and empower him to do the right thing by Anne. His reward is her ghost-appearance at the end, when she comes to take him with her, out of the picture.

Georges’s determination to fulfill the pact on his own terms is strengthened by the intrusion of others, especially his daughter Eva, who has been ignored in criticism, although she occupies a crucial place in the family dynamic. With the figure of Eva, Haneke develops the dialectic of surface and depth further, revealing power mechanisms that define the relationships between parents and children.²⁸ Her three strategically placed visits mark Anne’s progressive deterioration and provoke Georges to greater resolve. The first time, while Anne is still in the hospital, Georges receives Eva on a visit from London, where she lives with her British husband Geoff, a pianist like Anne, and two grown children. As with his wife before, Georges is in control and conducts the conversation like an interview. He asserts his authority, keeping the focus on Eva’s life in order to gain time. He acts the part of a father, playing it matter-of-factly, while everything in his face indicates fear. Eva, likewise, plays the good daughter, politely respecting the family codes that insure the smooth surface. Socially and personally, as wife and mother in a household of pianists, she is the image of the parental model. Under the veneer of her cosmopolitan life-style, however, lurk anxiety, ennui, adultery, and financial troubles, the stuff of realism and naturalism.²⁹ While Eva wants to be informed and possibly useful, we sense that, leading her own complicated life, the help she could provide is limited. Georges knows his daughter, and they seem to have an unspoken understanding. Nonetheless he keeps her at a distance because, knowing his wife, he needs to keep his options open. Minimizing the consequences of the failed surgery, he wants this conversation over and the daughter gone. He puts up a front that ranges from cynicism to feigned tiredness to categorical dismissal and to a de-dramatizing, “we’ll manage. We’ve been through quite a lot in our time, your mother and I.”³⁰ Eva is as tenacious as her parents. She counters with a disturbing childhood memory, challenging the father on the ethical and emotional level: “It’s funny. I don’t know if I should say it. Maybe it’ll embarrass you. But when I came here a short while ago, I suddenly remembered how I always used to listen to the two of you making love when I was little.”³¹ The camera lingers on a smiling Eva who lets this news sink in. The choice of this sort of memory underscores Haneke’s ongoing dialogue with naturalism, calling attention to the sexual, biological basis of the family. Eva reflects and accepts this natural reality, telling her father that she was reassured: “It gave me a feeling that you loved each other, and that we’d always be together.”³² While on the surface, this daughterly confidence can be understood as a sincere attempt to connect, Eva’s move from the parental “you” to the “we,” in its desire for permanence and inclusion is also a trespass of the family code.³³ With this

²⁷ Grundmann, “Show your Love” 17.

²⁸ See Christopher Sharrett, “The World That Is Known, an Interview with Michael Haneke,” in Grundmann, *A Companion to Michael Haneke* 587. Here Haneke explains how he sees “the family as the germinating cell for conflicts” and the family as “the locus of the miniature war, the site of all warfare.”

²⁹ The memory of Isabelle Huppert’s *Madame Bovary* in Claude Chabrol’s film strengthens this connection.

³⁰ *Amour*, Screenplay 16.

³¹ *Amour*, Screenplay 16-17.

³² *Amour*, Screenplay 17.

³³ *Amour*, Screenplay 16. For Ursula Tidd, Huppert “incarnates the existential ambiguity of women’s situation in post-war western patriarchy as a twisting path between freedom and responsibility, transgression and convention”

Freudian memory, in contrast to more standard ones, Haneke gives the audience a glimpse beneath the surface of convention into the abyss of a fundamental disconnect between these people. Eva's sharing of a commonly suppressed childhood memory, in particular with her father, is a symptom of her need to bond while pointing to the impossibility of doing so. The clumsiness of her attempt to provoke her father and to connect backfires as it strengthens Georges's resolve to keep her out, as he and Anne presumably did when Eva was a child. With scenes like these, Haneke draws the viewer into the action, challenging her to self-awareness.³⁴

By Eva's second visit, with the detached and coldhearted Geoff whom Anne abhors and would rather not see, things have reached a point of no return.³⁵ Georges has weathered Anne's suicide attempt and a second stroke. He is summoning his remaining energies to steel himself for what lies ahead of him alone. All solicitations from the outside are felt as threats to the secret pact that loyal Georges intends to honor for the sake of love, dignity, and possibly guilt.³⁶ From his perspective, which the audience is led to adopt because we have witnessed his increasing stress and strain, Geoff's patronizing pragmatism and Eva's aggressive indignation come across as self-serving, tiresome and insulting. And why does Haneke begin this visit *in medias res*, with Eva belaboring her invalid mother with her real estate problems (she cannot find an apartment in Paris) – if not to suggest that “amour” is always also imbued with self-interest and not free of socio-economic considerations? Georges's profession is never indicated. It is Anne, the professional piano teacher, who wields the power of command in the family. A telling scene shows her putting her former student, who pays a visit after her stroke, in his place by making him play the one piece he never mastered. Georges, embarrassed, lets it happen. If we accept that Eva, like her father to her mother, plays handmaid to Geoff, it makes sense, from a bourgeois point of view, that she compensates for lack of a paycheck by looking out for her material interests. Under the circumstances, she appears callous, as she dismisses her mother's stammering efforts to respond with her own story of financial loss with a categorical “I don't understand you!”³⁷ The power of this scene resides in its layering effect: the viewer's expectation of filial compassion is thwarted by Haneke's insistence on the naturalist tenet that interest – and conflict of interest – are fundamental in all relationships. Haneke reinforces this point in the parallel scene where Geoff, in the living room, questions Georges about the cost of nurses.³⁸

Eva's flood of tears when she storms into the living room expresses a web of emotions. When she reacts to Geoff's conventional reassurance with a categorical “Nothing is OK,” we can assume that underneath all the noise lurks impotent anger at the cosmos, her mother's state, her father's exclusion of her, her disempowerment, her own situation as wife, and maybe a bad conscience. Georges freezes at Eva's scene. His temperament abhors drama and hysterics.³⁹ He factually and rather testily demolishes what seem to him their half-baked attempts at a proper solution.⁴⁰ At this point, with Anne beyond recovery, we know, like Georges, that the young

(“Devenir Mère: Trajectories of the Maternal Bond in Recent Films Starring Isabelle Huppert,” in *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema* [New York: Berghahn Books, 2012] 33).

³⁴ The (Edipal) nature of the parent-child relationship here seen from the point of view of the child, constitutes another layer, that of Haneke's indebtedness to Freud and Lacan.

³⁵ *Amour*, Screenplay 39.

³⁶ *Amour*, Screenplay 21, 25, 30.

³⁷ *Amour*, Screenplay 24, 25, 43.

³⁸ See also Zielinski 7.

³⁹ *Amour*, Screenplay 63. Anne describes Georges as serious and uptight.

⁴⁰ *Amour*, Screenplay 44-46.

couple's "worries" are indeed of no use to Georges whose determination has been solidified with each intrusion.

Things are coming to a head. Eva's last visit follows the tense scene of Georges's firing an abusive nurse and his impulsive slapping of Anne after she refused to eat and drink. Her defiant act of spitting the water back at him, a persistent symptom of the Nietzschean will to power, or in the Lacanian sense, "a diabolical rehearsal of the radically limited options available to the infant/infirm,"⁴¹ is more than a plea; it is a command for Georges to act. Just as he is trying to gather his strength, Eva, like a bad memory, bullies her way back into the parental orbit. Her urgency is at odds with her parents' ever quieter and firmer determination. Anne's extreme agitation after Eva's absurd question "Can I do something for you?" underscores this point. While we understand Eva's frustration and pain, we also realize, in the next scene, that her theatrics hide not only the fear of losing her mother, but also her guilt for not stepping up, and a secret if not unconscious interest in the apartment. Since the first visit, Eva knew the truth but denied it, letting herself be excluded, allowing her father to deal with the situation, hoping for the best. On the surface, her exclusion is convenient. It serves her purpose doubly: being unwanted, her lack of involvement and her anger are justified. However, on the level of truth, Eva is called to account. Her last demand for a "serious talk," considering the reality of the situation, is intolerable to Georges, who confronts her with options that both know she will not act on. In his terrible "What do you want?" rings the Lacanian "Che Vuoi?" – the ultimate question leading us into the recognition of our true desires that we are busy suppressing.⁴² Eva's final silence reveals what her emotional outbursts hid and postponed: relief to accept her father's will and to be freed from responsibility for her parents. Haneke rather brutally ends with the image of Eva sitting alone in her father's chair in the still-furnished apartment from which her parents are gone. She will continue the family's character and she now has the apartment in Paris that she wanted.

To be human, for Haneke as for Balzac, Zola, Nietzsche, and Freud, means to be part of a species determined by forces which we can try to understand and manipulate but are ultimately unable to overcome. The interest here lies in the strength of character a person demonstrates in the confrontation with truth. The situation in *Amour* highlights the truth that we are determined by physical reality. The stress of organic disease brings to the surface the character of the family and the tension within it. Looking at Haneke's cinematic family album with its various versions of Anne, Georges, or Eva, we find the same basic conflicts in each family, which arise from the inevitable human tension between our need for connection and our self-interest. This tension inhibits true communication. Instead, we rely on codes and conventions that enable us to interact but also to hide our intentions from others and ourselves. Intelligent characters, Anne and Georges are realistic characters precisely because they are conscious of this dynamic of surface and depth, which they exhibit to us and perform with each other and their daughter. *Amour* conducts a dialogue with naturalism in its allegiance to the human-all-too human level that makes us all equal. Georges, Anne, and Eva are types that exhibit the great flaw. But what makes the film so poignant to viewers is Anne and Georges's strength to confront their situation with self-knowledge, determination, and the unswerving commitment to the exertion of individual will.

It is significant that Haneke quotes Nietzsche in full: "It's undignified for a philosopher to say the good and the beautiful are one. And if he were to add: and the true!, one should beat

⁴¹ Grundmann, "Show Your Love" 17.

⁴² Jacques Lacan, *La Relation d'objet. Séminaire IV (1956-57)*, séance du 6 février 1957 (Paris: Seuil, 1994) 169.

him. Truth is ugly.”⁴³ Indeed, I consider this insight a leitmotif for all of Haneke’s films, and in particular for *Amour*, wherein the “ugliness” of the truth is shown realistically, yet not sordidly. Haneke understands that in Nietzschean terms truth is only ugly if reduced to its metaphysical dimension, which denies, denigrates and saps life and our creative energy, which gives life drive and meaning. There is no one truth “out there,” but only the individual’s experience of truths in this real and sensual life. Translated into the artistic sphere, Haneke subscribes in *Amour* to Nietzschean aesthetics, cultivating the taste for the surface out of a profound knowledge of personal truths that thereby can become productive and life-affirming. In his own words: “I think it is the task of the dramatic arts to reveal the conflicts at the heart of our existence, and that has been true since the ancient Greeks.”⁴⁴ It takes courage, discipline, honesty, commitment, and love of life, the other, and self, to accept what we are given and to take up the challenge with dignity. This is what Anne and Georges are trying to maintain throughout their ordeal. Georges’s final act of killing his wife, ending the agony, transcends the barrier that keeps life, love, and death apart. It is monstrous, but is also a form of *Liebestod* that his mysterious vanishing from the film supports. Paradoxically, though not obvious at first, *Amour* comes close to the tragic wisdom of the Nietzschean *Amor Fati*, the great affirmation of life and love with all its suffering, darkness, and destructive impulses.

⁴³ Grabner 15.

⁴⁴ Zielinski 8.