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The Intouchables: Who Defines Antisocial?

Written and directed by Olivier Nakache and Erik Toledano. Co-produced by Quad Productions, Chaocorp, Gaumont, and TF1 Films Production. Distribution by The Weinstein Company. Limited release in the United States May 25, 2012. 112 minutes.

The Intouchables[1] treats us to a new permutation of the buddy film. Set in contemporary Paris and based on an actual relationship, it depicts a rich, former daredevil with quadriplegia paired with a Senegalese immigrant who is a lost boy and a dedicated slacker. The chair-bound and fastidious Philippe (François Cluzet) requires a high level of personal care. He can afford it but is very selective and determined not to be pitied. Enter Driss (Omar Sy), whose sole concern at the outset is getting his unemployment paper signed, so he can get benefits and enjoy a carefree street life.

In the opening scene, Driss recklessly drives Philippe through Paris traffic in a Maserati. Unable to avoid a police stop, Driss bets his paralyzed passenger that he (Driss) can talk his way out of it; Philippe fakes a seizure, slobbering on his beard. More, Driss doubles the bet, suggesting that the police will escort them to the hospital. The pair's histrionics flawlessly persuade the police, who escort them to the emergency room entrance. Just as the hospital orderlies wheel out a gurney, Driss hits the gas. We track their getaway much later in the film. Right away, we cheer for dyssocial wish fulfillment.

Driss, somewhat hyperactive, shows up at a mansion for a job interview. Not his idea; he did it to pretend that he had looked for work, sure that no one would hire him. A signature stands between him and benefits. A casually dressed and impatient black man amid a dozen seated white guys in suits, he is intolerant of the process. When he can wait no longer he barges into the interview room, brashly slapping the paper onto a desk. A pretty redheaded assistant (Audrey Fleurot) asks him questions and gets nothing from him but intimations of sexual arousal. The boss, Philippe, reveals himself, self-confident and unflappable, and seems intrigued by the anomaly of Driss. Philippe, who controls his chair with a mouth stick, calls Driss's bluff, saying that while he cannot sign the paper (the first of many quad jokes), Driss can have it the next morning. Driss agrees, and as he returns to the projects we learn he has stolen a jeweled egg from the mansion. This isn't funny. He presents it to an unappreciative aunt, who hasn't seen him for months. Seeing through him and regarding him as a negative role model for the several younger siblings (who adore him), she kicks him out. After spending the night getting high with street cronies, Driss returns to Philippe's mansion, not to the signed paper, but to a tour of the house and a luxurious bedroom and *en suite* bath. Apparently, he has been hired. After a brief review of his duties, which include manual evacuation of the master's bowels and the instruction that he monitor the man on a 24/7 infant surveillance intercom, he re-encounters Philippe, who bets Driss won't last two weeks.

Philippe has Driss investigated and finds he has a minor criminal record. He has spent six months in jail, which explains why he hadn't been home. This bothers Philippe's attorney, who, articulating the prevailing theory of psychopathy, points out that types such as Driss are brutes and have no pity. Exactly, Philippe retorts, "no pity" is what he wants. The table is now set for the collision of cultures and worldviews. It takes a while for Driss to appreciate quadriplegia and the disparity between Philippe's confident personality and his total dependence on others for survival. In an odd melding of antisocial behavior and slapstick, we see Philippe pretending to sleep while Driss accidentally spills hot tea on him and gets no reaction. Still incredulous, Driss touches the teapot and recoils in pain and then proceeds to pour the liquid onto the boss's legs in a disturbingly playful fashion. This scene does not depict the ultraviolence of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*; rather, it portrays a child's amazement at something never imagined. Philippe opens his eyes and calmly schools Driss that he can neither move nor feel from the neck down. From the audience's perspective, Cluzet can only act from the neck up and does a remarkable job of portraying dignity, humor, panic, and sexual arousal (with his ears).

Remarkably too, Philippe is unperturbed by Driss's shenanigans. The caregiver consistently flouts social conventions, has no respect for the autonomy of others, and uses force to impose his will on strangers. The house staff, including the redhead Magalie and Philippe's majordomo Yvonne (Anne Le Ny), is wary but largely amused by Driss's insouciance. We were too. Magalie has his number, suggesting at times that she could be seduced, only to laugh at him with his pants down. Sparing no amount of charm, he is persistent with her, even at the end when she reveals her same-sex preference. Magalie plays gotcha! with him once more when she whispers in his ear that she'd consider a threesome, followed by, "I'm kidding," which nearly wipes the disarming grin off his face. Sy is exceptionally charming in the role of Driss. The character believes he is irresistible, and Sy makes it so. In recognition, he won the 2012 French César award for best actor, nosing out Jean Dujardin (*The Artist*).

Besides his antisocial behavior (bullying and mild violence, cutting queues, and driving like a maniac), Driss is hilarious as he encounters Philippe's world of privilege and culture. We see Philippe staring at a modern painting, remarking on the esthetics, while Driss, mouth agape, looks at the white canvas with a smudge of red and calls it a nosebleed. The painting probably costs about €30,000. When Philippe shows interest, against Driss's urgings, the gallery worker checks the price. When she sheepishly comes back with the figure of €41,500, Philippe instantly says, "I'll take it." We soon see Driss, easel and canvas in his room, small paint roller in his hand, creating some smudges of his own. Miraculously, he produces an abstract piece, which Philippe, Magalie, and Yvonne all like. Driss wonders, "What can I get for this?" We then see Philippe with the art dealer, pokerfaced, lying about this new artist's upcoming shows in London and Germany. Has he adopted some of Driss's street-hustler ways? The dealer buys it and pays €11,000. Later, aboard Philippe's private jet (en route to paragliding in the mountains), a giddy Driss gets the cash. Although it is not explicit, he probably uses it to help his little brother out of some trouble, one of the steps he takes toward redemption.

Usually though, Driss is not respectful of others. When Philippe takes him to the opera, he laughs and talks through it, disturbing others and cracking up at a character dressed up as a tree, singing in German. When he learns Philippe has had an epistolary relationship with a woman for months, Driss puts intense pressure on him to make personal contact. Here, he shows less contempt and more empathy, sensing that Philippe has potential. Driss grabs a letter from the pen pal, dials her phone number, and forces his boss to talk. It turns out that she will be visiting Paris, and they make a date. Philippe, accompanied by Yvonne, wait in a restaurant for her, but even after several shots of whiskey, his tension is unbearable and he makes her leave with him. We see them passing the woman near the entrance; Philippe is not ready to be seen in his condition.

In another step toward redemption, Driss intervenes when Philippe needs guidance on how to set limits with his teenaged daughter. Philippe has a chamber music concert in his home to celebrate his birthday, but his daughter stays in bed, feeling the effects of an overdose of Imodium and Tylenol after a tiff with her boyfriend. The concert is a total bore. Seeing that Driss doesn't appreciate the music, Philippe orders the orchestra to play in various styles. No dice. In response, Driss attaches his iPod to a sound system, treating everyone to the pop group Earth, Wind, and Fire (performing "September"). His dance moves and ability to mobilize Philippe's staff are quite charming. In a turning point in the film, Philippe appreciates at once their commonalities and differences. As close as they have become, they are from different worlds and will eventually go their separate ways.

Ultimately, Driss seems at home with his role and relationship with Philippe. His work is nearly done, and he gravitates back to his adoptive family. Philippe does not despair overtly and resumes the process of interviewing caregivers, but he stops grooming and dressing, and we can infer that he is in mourning. The new caregiver, lacking Driss's charisma, runs into trouble. In the middle of the night, he hears Philippe in distress and finds him in an agitated state. This phenomenon was previously described as a whole-body phantom pain attack. Philippe dismisses the flustered aide, but Yvonne summons Driss. Seeing how Philippe has let himself deteriorate, Driss scoops him into the car and we see the continuation of the opening scene.

From the hospital driveway they go to a seaside hotel, where Driss shaves Philippe in bits and pieces, so that his moustache looks, in turns, like a biker's, his own grandfather's, and Hitler's. Once again,

Driss toys with the helpless man, who pretends to protest. One can almost see Philippe's neurotransmitters coming back on line. When they go for dinner, Driss wheels his now restored friend to the table. Philippe acknowledges that Driss has matters of his own to sort out. Driss, who has retrieved the jeweled egg, a memento of his boss's former life, places it on the table, closing a circle. He walks away from a bewildered Philippe. A moment later, his pen pal walks in and a page is turned. Driss later appears at the unemployment office, still flirting with the clerk. He winks at us by showing her he recognizes a print of Dali's melting clocks; a man with a higher sensibility but continuity of the self. We presume the same about Philippe.

The Intouchables was based on Philippe Pozzo di Borgo's memoir, *A Second Wind*,[2] the story of an unlikely but mutually affirming friendship. The Driss character is based on Abdel Sellou, an Algerian, who wrote a memoir of his own, prefaced by Pozzo di Borgo.[3] The desolation and dreariness of Driss's urban ghetto stands in jarring contrast to the wealth and sophistication of Philippe's world. However disparate their origins may be, they have similar and somewhat complementary psychological needs. *The Intouchables* is not a Pygmalion story of a rich man reshaping a ghetto kid. Nor is it simply a matter of opposites attracting or adapting, a staple of buddy situations since Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*. It is a portrayal of adaptation, receptivity to transformation, and the raw material of love. Each character becomes reconnected with himself within the culture medium of the dyad. Because forensic psychiatry explores the subjective narrative and how adaptations inform choices, the film is instructive.

Driss's world is full of unstable relationships. He arrives in France after having been given up by his parents to his childless aunt and uncle who eventually had their own children. He becomes a petty criminal, with no sense of trust in the French society around him or in the welfare system on which he is dependent. The most critical event in Driss's slow metamorphosis from a lost young offender to a responsible, hopeful adult is the establishment of a trusting relationship with Philippe. The abundance and wealth of Philippe's surroundings and the constant presence of household help in the early scenes of the movie belie his true need: an honest relationship, one that would mirror him and acknowledge his paralysis and loss of freedom; no more, no less.

The interview scene, where Philippe and his assistant talk to potential caregivers, is quite telling. Magalie scores the interviewees on credentials and surface characteristics, whereas Philippe intuits the applicants' souls. A good caregiver is one who is able to help the patient in and out of bed or wheelchair, feed him, bathe him, help him exercise and give him his medications. This apparently is not what Philippe wanted: an acknowledgment of his loneliness and a warm human connection, which he finds in Driss, unaccountably to us at first. Seen from this perspective, the two men have more in common than it initially appears. Each is incredibly lonely, with lives full of constraints. Both are *intouchables*.

What would we conclude if Driss were court ordered to us for an examination? Would he score enough points on a gold-standard inventory to receive the *bacio di morte*, a label of antisocial personality disorder or psychopathy? As we adapt to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Diseases, Fifth Edition (DSM-5),[4] we must renew efforts to resist top-down, or checklist, approaches to understanding human behavior: that is, the temptation to make diagnoses by relying on surface behaviors, self-reports, and diagnostic criteria. This is especially true when courts equate a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder with irremediable evil and inevitable danger. How then do we regard Driss? By his antisocial surface behaviors, by more of a core deficit of the dissocial personality[5] or the classic psychopath,[6] or by his offbeat empathic use of the self and intuitive prosocial agency of change? Lost within the intersubjectivity and mutual wish-fulfillment of the two men, labels are irrelevant—worse, destructive to an appreciation of their narrative, their *pas de deux*. Beyond that, Driss is able to individuate, evidenced by acts of kindness and personal redemption. It is this sort of clinical data that psychiatry can offer the justice system, rather than a label or a number.

In his memoir, di Borgo gave a subjective assessment of Abdel, the real Driss, a type of data one would never find in a forensic examination, but nonetheless illuminating:

> He was unbearable, vain, proud, brutal, inconsistent, human. Without him, I would have rotted to death. Abdel looked after me without fail, as if I was a babe in arms. Attentive to the smallest detail, close to me when I was miles away from myself, he set me free when I was a prisoner, protected me when I was weak, made me laugh when I cried. He was my guardian devil [Ref. 2, p 105].

His guardian angel had been his wife, Béatrice, who died after a long illness three years after his accident. Abdel helped him through her last days and the depression that followed.[3] The sequence in the movie is that Philippe hires Driss after Béatrice's death. Though the dynamic of Philippe's loss of mobility followed by bereavement is barely touched upon in the movie, it is quite prominent in the memoir. Thus, Driss's importance in healing Philippe cannot be overestimated. They were together for 10 years.

Despite his crassness, Driss is no psychopath. His connection to Philippe is warm, genuine, and (almost) nonexploitative. He is charming but not callous. His penchant for violent interventions could be considered a survival strategy in the ghetto. Yet, had he been caught in any of these escapades, the surface behaviors, decontextualized, would be prosecuted. And undoubtedly, he would have acquired the label of antisocial (or dyssocial) personality disorder, effectively closing doors to him.

How Driss dealt with his troubled younger brother and Philippe's petulant teenage daughter shows his appreciation of rules and limits in behavior. In the presence of hope and a more trusting view of the world he was eventually able to move forward. This is consistent with Winnicott's observations: "The antisocial tendency *is not a diagnosis*. It does not compare directly with other diagnostic terms such as neurosis and psychosis. The antisocial tendency may be found in a normal individual, or in one that is neurotic or psychotic" (Ref. 7, p 308, italics in original). Diagnostic systems, however, insist on retaining syndromal credibility for antisocial behavior/mentality, which is readily adopted by juvenile and criminal justice systems.[7–9] How can we reconcile arbitrary needs of social systems with deeper truths about human development? *The Intouchables* is about hope and adaptation. Those of us who educate courts need to distinguish behavioral types from the bottom up—that is, by appreciating the total arc of a person's life rather than settling for a snapshot. Where possible, one might forget types altogether and focus on individuals, not on their diagnoses.

The Intouchables might be criticized for its sentimentality and rose-colored optimism.[10] The basic premises of hope and adaptation through an affirming relationship can sound hollow or corny and could lead to keeping bad people on the streets. Should society give up on those labeled antisocial? The age-old notion that criminals cannot change persists, and, by definition (or, at least, convention), personality disorders are stable and ingrained patterns. Still, attempts at treatment continue,[11] though it is too early to consider antisocial behavior treatable.[12] While we would not want to see the determination of offenders' dispositions entirely relegated to psychometrics or neuroimaging, there may be ways to assign differential therapeutics based on biological subtypes.[13] This antidote would be a welcome one to the traditional one-size-fits-all mentality of public policy makers.[12]

With these thoughts in mind, on the theme of hope, once again is Winnicott:

> The antisocial tendency implies hope. Lack of hope is the basic feature of the deprived child who, of course, is not all the time being antisocial. In the period of hope the child manifests an antisocial tendency. This may be awkward for society, and for you if it is your bicycle that is stolen, but those who are not personally involved can see the hope that underlies the compulsion to steal. Perhaps one of the reasons why we tend to leave the therapy of the delinquent to others is that we dislike being stolen from? [Ref. 7, p 309, italics in original].

We can see the wisdom in Winnicott's formulation in Abdel Sellou's unashamed summary of his transformation:

> I put myself in the service of Philippe Pozzo di Borgo because I was young—young and stupid: I wanted to drive beautiful cars, travel first-class, sleep in chateaux, pinch rich women's asses, and laugh at their little offended squeals. I don't regret anything . . . I became aware . . . that I finished growing up next to Monsieur Pozzo, from hope to an appetite for living, by way of the heart. Now it's my turn to be lyrical, like abstract art . . . He offered his wheelchair for me to push like a crutch for me to lean on. I'm still using it today [Ref. 3, p 176].

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Hope Springs: A New Spring in Depicting Therapists and Treatment by Hollywood?

Screenplay by Vanessa Taylor. Directed by David Frankel. Produced by Guymon Dasady, Brian Bell, Lance Johnson, *et al*. A Management 360/Escape Artists/Mandate Pictures/ Tomkats Catering co-production distributed by Columbia Pictures. Released in the United States August 8, 2012. 100 minutes.

Since the mid-1960s, the end of the era that the Gabbard brothers called The Golden Age of Hollywood's depiction of psychiatrists and psychiatric treatment, major motion pictures have tended to portray psychiatrists and treatments negatively. Whether evil or foolish, psychiatrists have galloped across boundaries with their patients in all manner of self-serving or clumsy ways. Most mental health professionals, when asked to think of the last film that showed a psychiatrist or other mental health professional (Hollywood isn't particularly careful in distinguishing the different types) behaving ethically and effectively, end up reaching all the way back to 1980 and *Ordinary People*.

In 2012, we now have a film that transcends the stereotypes of the depraved Hannibal Lecter (*Silence of the Lambs*) or the bumbling psychiatrist (*What About Bob?*) and presents a psychiatrist as an earnest, skillful, ethical professional. *Hope Springs*, directed by David Frankel, depicts an ordinary, older midwestern couple, Kay (Meryl Streep) and Arnold (Tommy Lee Jones), whose marriage is dying on the vine. Kay learns about a five-day marital therapy intensive treatment program offered by Dr. Feld (Steve Carell). Crusty and skeptical Arnold, who is in denial about Kay's withering happiness in their sexually inert relationship, has no intention of honoring Kay's request to try this treatment. Through clever and relentless approaches, which are a model of how one might convince a reluctant person to get treatment, Kay eventually recruits Arnold to fly with her to Maine and they spend the week working with Dr. Feld, as a couple. The quaint Maine resort town seems to come out of a historical era that could easily have been when Kay and Arnold were first romantic together.

Unlike many films with psychiatrists in which the doctor is a featured character, Dr. Feld is more of a means to an end than a focus of the film. Though instrumental in facilitating the essential arc of this couple's journey, he is not depicted with typical Hollywood stereotypes, such as the wounded healer, whose own mending comes through his work with the leads (e.g., *Good Will Hunting*). Hence, the plot needs only to focus on Dr. Feld's giving therapy and not on his back or side story. Steve Carell was a challenging casting choice as the therapist, since it's hard to overcome so many associations with him as a comic actor. Yet, he plays this role not just straight, but with a level of professionalism and expertise that could be used to instruct students in the nuances of marital therapy. Watching his technique with the couple, whom he sees both individually and together during the intensive treatment week, I found myself thinking what I would do or say, just before Dr. Feld speaks. To my amazement, we were almost always in agreement. This was really solid, mainstream therapy, in the hands of a clearly seasoned, responsible professional; no weird exercises, no exploitation for the doctor's gain or narcissistic fulfillment, none of the ethically questionable devices that are habitually mobilized by directors trying to get some dramatic twist out of the psychiatrist character. Yet, there was nothing boring about Dr. Feld. I wasn't simply relieved to see a treater and his techniques portrayed so faithfully, but I actually admired Dr. Feld for his