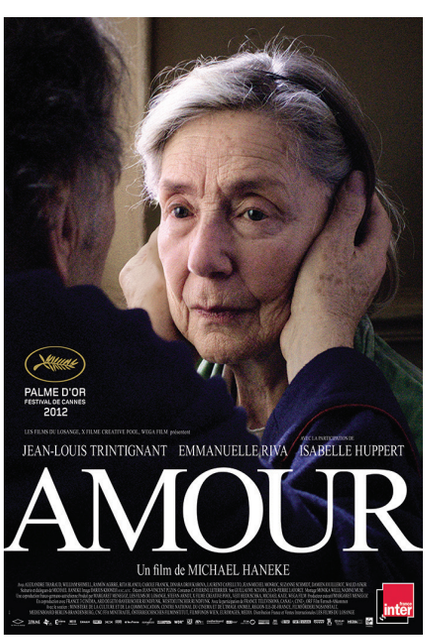
AMOUR
Screenplay and Directed by Michael Haneke
2012

Michael Haneke's latest film *Amour* is as starkly moving and memorable as anything screened in recent years. That its two characters, Georges and Anne, retirees in their 80s, are played by Jean-Louis Trintignant (who became a star with Brigitte Bardot as long ago as 1956) and Emmanuelle Riva ('Elle' in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 1959), adds a frisson to what is a full-frontal study of decline and death. I doubt anybody working in a retirement home would find anything especially startling about the film, but the sheer rarity of 2 hours in the cinema being given over to 'age, and then the only end of age', as Philip Larkin called it, was enough for the American writer Francine Prose to suggest recently that *Amour* is the 'ultimate horror film'. It is a masterpiece, she added, but you may not want to recommend it to your friends.

Amour is indeed a love story — an intimate one in its ultimate chapter. Georges and Anne live in a well-appointed, high-ceilinged, not quite modern Paris apartment with plenty of books and paintings, and a piano demi-queue. He is a musicologist; she a piano teacher. Theirs is a decorous bubble. The only time the film leaves it we see them in the audience for a performance of a Schubert impromptu by one of her former pupils. Then Anne suffers her first ischaemic attack due to a carotid stenosis (a technically brilliant scene with an intermittently running tap as commentary); when surgery doesn't work out she returns home with a stroke paralysing the right side of her body, and then progressively dements, until there are nights when all she does is howl *'mal! mal! mal!'*. Having promised not to put her into a home, Georges takes on the task of caring for her, a task made not a jot easier by his own frailty (Trintignant actually broke his hand during filming). He has to master the choreography of lifting her off the toilet, bathing her, putting her into her wheelchair, and spoon-feeding her. At one point she signals her determination to end her life by refusing to drink. He squirts some water past her lips. She spits it out in his face, and he slaps her in frustration. Then he apologises in his civilised way. It is clear that the apartment is a place under siege, and nobody is going to get out alive.



If *Amour* recalls a work of literature, it is surely Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which puts the reader into the mind of a man who knows he's dying. *'I have been here. Now I am going there. Where? ... No, I won't have it!* Whereas Tolstoy's book leaves the reader's imagination free to arrive at the conclusion exercising its author — that Ivan's soul has been dead for years, and is paradoxically brought back to life by his realising, on the verge of physical death, its very emptiness — *Amour*, which subjects Georges' sympathy and compassion to the hardest testing, provides no such comfort. Even the music fades (one of the more sardonic if hardly lighter moments is Georges' recounting the absurdity of attending a friend's funeral at which the Beatles' *Yesterday* was played). Georges and Anne are thrown back into each other's company. While she is still lucid, there is a gentle humour in their relationship. When she loses her mind, the routine becomes excruciating.

Haneke, who is sometimes as coldly controlling a director as Hitchcock could be, is unsparing, clinical even, in his depiction of the indignities and humiliations of old age. Trintignant and Riva act with real grace, and more than a little courage: Riva had to strip for a scene in which she is bathed by the visiting nurse. Old age, you realise, is about the inevitability of the body; it simply can't be avoided. It is primeval. Haneke dislikes the idea of performance as catharsis, and often deliberately leaves his films unresolved: at the end of *Amour*, Georges and Anne's harried, self-absorbed daughter, played by Isabelle Huppert, returns alone to the apartment to ponder the events recounted. At one point she had exasperatedly asked her father, *'What's going to happen?'* And he replies, *'What's going to happen is what has happened up until now'*. That the viewer is led to witness Georges' killing of his wife as a liberation testifies to Haneke's fastidious way; we realise we have been anticipating this act since the beginning of the film, when firemen break down the door of the deserted apartment to find Anne's body. Georges has, in effect, answered his daughter's question again, this time with violence. Haneke doesn't show us what consequences this may have for him, or even what happens to him after he seals the doors of their apartment (his mind is surely deteriorating too).

For all its brilliance I felt there was a false note in *Amour*: it lies, surely, in Haneke's desire, and evident ability, to make a masterpiece of cinema about a universal experience that is sometimes appalling, but often extenuated by family and friends. Burdening others is part of the load of love. No doctors attend to this solitary couple; their life seems to take place outside society. Yet a society is watching what they do. Haneke runs the risk that his idea of 'love' may be interpreted as a blanket term, pun intended, for euthanasia.

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