

Amour (2012)

“It's beautiful. Life. So long.”

Major Credits:

Director: Michael Haneke

Screenplay: Michael Haneke

Cinematography: Darius Khondji

Cast: Jean-Louis Trintignant (Georges), Emmanuelle Riva (Anne), Isabelle Huppert (Eva)

Background:

Austrian Michael Haneke remains one of the most respected directors in Europe, which may help explain how he was able to recruit three of France's most distinguished actors to feature in this demanding film. He wrote the screenplay with Jean-Louis Trintignant (*My Night at Maud's* [1969], *The Conformist* [1970]) in mind. Although Emmanuelle Riva was an icon of the French New Wave (*Hiroshima, mon amour* [1959]) and much admired by the director, she had to earn the role through auditions, where she proved herself best by far for the part, according to Haneke. Perhaps the greatest French actress of the next generation, Isabelle Huppert, had starred in Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001), for which she won the acting award at Cannes. *Amour* won countless awards, including the *Palme d'or* at Cannes, six Césars, and five Academy Award nominations, winning the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.

Amour appeared as something of an anomaly among Haneke's works—*Funny Games* (1997, remade in English in 2007), *Code Unknown* (2000), *The Piano Teacher*, *Caché* (2005), *The White Ribbon* (2009)—which had previously been marked by violence, fear, and pathology. It is also unusual among movies in any language for its serious and sustained treatment of the condition of old age. Trintignant was 82 and Riva 85, with more than 200 acting credits between them, at the time of production.

Haneke meticulously re-constructed the interior of his parents' apartment for the set of *Amour*. He then carefully blocked every movement and arranged every physical detail in this exemplar of what theorists of cinema define as the “closed” film.

Cinematic Aspects:

Haneke defines himself as a *formalist* filmmaker, one who is inspired by impressions rather than ideas or “themes.” For *Amour*, he has intensified his customary austere style with the goal of simplifying technique to correspond with the spare narrative. Most obviously, he has confined nearly every scene to a single set and eliminated all non-diegetic sound. He deploys long takes and medium shots with almost no camera movement. By the conclusion, the spectator knows virtually every space in the apartment. Nevertheless, a couple of unusual devices might draw our attention:

1. blackouts—The first half of the film incorporates a series of prolonged moments when the screen goes entirely black. The effect creates a momentary suspense and may possibly be associated with Anne's medical condition.
2. montage—In one striking sequence near the end, Haneke deploys a beautiful montage of six landscape paintings, which we may recognize as artifacts on the walls of the apartment.
3. composition—The screen itself becomes a canvas for some beautifully lit formal arrangements (for example, the extended still life of Anne illuminated by her bedside lamp—a lamp she will later break), but perhaps the most interesting composition occurs in the very first long shot within the chronological narrative—inside the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées—when the camera somehow (how, precisely?) directs the spectator's attention to the protagonists sitting among the large audience. This shot, incidentally, might be likened to the final shot in *Caché*: again, the film spectator is looking for people within the frame who bear meaning.

Questions for Discussion:

1. *Amour* uses a flashback structure to tell its story. How does our awareness of the opening scene color our reception of everything else that follows? How does Haneke, whose earlier films are noteworthy for their creation of suspense, manage to upset our expectations despite knowing the outcome of the plot?
2. In a film that emphasizes the material details of living, the pigeon stands out as an expressive image, even taking over the story Georges writes in his note. What does the bird symbolically represent?
3. Georges relates a couple of extended stories about his boyhood. How do these stories-within-the-story affect our comprehension of his character and ultimate motivation?
4. Above all, Haneke has tried to avoid sentimentality in *Amour*, but his restraint risks coldness and even morbidity, qualities that have been attached to his earlier works. Does this film manage to maintain an appropriate tone in confronting its subject material?
5. Reconsider the film's title. As perhaps the definitive cinematic meditation on the subject of love, what values does *Amour* seem to affirm?