Odd men in: Intouchables

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Odd Men In: *Intouchables*

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Résumé

Le film Intouchables (*Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano, 2011*) *suggère par son titre que les protagonistes masculins – un aristocrate paralysé et un immigré noir, devenu sa 'nurse' après un pari – sont tous deux exclus du système économique courant, chacun à sa manière. Et pourtant le malade et sa 'nurse' se conduisent comme si les règles de comportement ne s'appliquent pas à eux, et se considèrent comme « intouchables ». En prenant au sérieux ce film, et en le considérant comme une comédie importante sur l'amitié masculine, j'examinerai d'abord le rôle de l'aristocrate comme un médiateur rusé, en me basant sur les théories d'Henri Bergson et d'Alenka Zupančič sur le rire et l'humour. Ensuite, je relativiserai l'objection que le fauteur de trouble français – véritable Eddy Murphy français – a été représenté comme un personnage négligent et soumis. Malgré la légitimité de cette objection, je suggérerai que la nature de la comédie qu'est* Intouchables *nous permet de voir la négligence et la soumission d'une autre manière.*

The film Intouchables (*Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano, 2011*) *suggests by its title that its male protagonists – a quadriplegic aristocrat and a black immigrant, employed as his nurse after a bet – are both excluded from the* (*current economic*) *system, each in his own way. And yet the patient and his medical aide behave as if rules of conduct are not applicable to them, and as such they regard themselves as inviolate. In taking* Intouchables *"seriously" as a major comedy about male bonding, I will first explore the role of the aristocrat as a cunning mediator against the background of theories on laughter and humour by Henri Bergson and Alenka Zupančič. Second, I will put into perspective the criticism that the wisecracking black troublemaker, a "French Eddie Murphy", has been represented as careless and submissive. Notwithstanding the legitimacy of this critique, I would like to suggest that the nature of a comedy enables us to read careless as curious and submissive as dedicated.*

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Ever since the ambitious Socialist plan for French cinema was launched in the late 1980s to "beat Hollywood at its own game",[1] each decade has had at least one French film with a massive worldwide appeal. For the 1990s, *Léon* (Luc Besson, 1994) was the resounding success;[2] there was *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) for the subsequent decade; and ten years later, *Intouchables* (Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache, 2011) was a tremendous box-office hit. The latter film was to suffer from a pattern which came to be known as the "*Amélie* effect".[3] As in the case of Jeunet's film, the reviews for *Intouchables* were initially mildly favourable, but once ticket sales exploded, the tone of critics became more sour towards this film about the close friendship between the quadriplegic aristocrat Philippe and the black immigrant Driss. The negative reviews published in the wake of the film's huge popularity usually highlighted two aspects related to class and race. First, *Intouchables* was charged with propagating a "nefarious faux egalitarianism" as if class boundaries in France can easily be transcended.[4] Because Driss, who comes from a background with poor prospects, never questions hierarchies of any kind and remains loyal to Philippe throughout, Andrew O'Hehir pejoratively dubbed the film "Driving Monsieur Daisy".[5] Second, like Eddie Murphy in a number of interracial Hollywood buddy comedies, such as *48 Hrs.* (Walter Hill, 1982) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (Martin Brest, 1984), Omar Sy's Driss plays the trite role of "the wisecracking urban troublemaker" who teaches whites "about black culture as a means of helping them loosen up".[6] In addition, Pettersen argues, the representation of Driss also brings to mind the American tradition of blackface and minstrelsy, whereas the *banlieue* in Paris is portrayed as "vague enough to evoke the impoverished urban areas attached to all major metropolises throughout the world".[7]

It is not my aim to take issue with these critical remarks or to shed more light on the film's interracial subtext, for the arguments are fairly convincing. But by exploring *Intouchables* as a comedy I nonetheless intend to put these

1 Charlie Michael, "Interpreting *Intouchables* : Competing Transnationalisms in Contemporary French Cinema", *SubStance* 43 (1), 2014, p. 129.

2 Although *Léon* was largely shot in New York and has an international cast, the director is French, as are the main actor and the production company (Les Films du Dauphin).

3 Michael, "Interpreting *Intouchables*: Competing Transnationalisms in Contemporary French Cinema", *op. cit.*, p. 131.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

5 Andrew O'Hehir, "*The Intouchables*: Racist Comedy, French Style", *Salon.com*, 22 May 2012.

6 David Pettersen, "Transnational Blackface, Neo-minstrelsy and the 'French Eddie Murphy' in *Intouchables*", *Modern & Contemporary France* 24 (1), 2016, p. 53.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

remarks in some perspective. Of course, I am not the first to take this film "seriously" as a comedy, but usually the focus is on Driss's "con-artist spirit" and his *joie de vivre*.[8] Driss is the energetic character who sets the sterile environment in motion, playing jokes on most of the film's white characters. An analysis of this role resonates with French philosopher Henri Bergson's ideas on laughter in his study *Le rire* [Laughter] (1900), but I would rather supplement this reading with what Alenka Zupančič in her study *The Odd One In* has called "another turn of the Bergsonian screw" by considering Philippe's crucial part as a cunning mediator. Drawing attention to Philippe's little highlighted share in this regard enables me to juxtapose the negativity surrounding Driss's representation with some "positive discriminatory" puns.

Do You Know Berlioz?

The second scene of *Intouchables*, after the opening credits, starts with a pan to the right that shows the lower legs of candidates interviewing for a job as a medical aide. The shot immediately reveals that one of the interviewees is out of place, for he wears slovenly jeans and worn-out sport shoes. Driss is not a serious applicant, and at one point he audaciously jumps the queue, for, as he says bluntly, he is there only because he needs a signature to prove he has shown up at the interview so that he will be eligible for welfare benefits. The wealthy art dealer Philippe, paralyzed from chin to toes, says that he is not able to provide him with the signature right away and asks Driss to come back the next morning. Once Driss returns, Philippe provokes him by claiming that a guy like Driss could not possibly keep up with the work of an aide for two weeks. Betting is one of Driss's favourite habits, but aside from that it is suggested that there are two reasons why Driss accepts the challenge. First, we have seen him take a bath in his aunt's much-too-cramped apartment; he pretends not to be impressed by Phillippe's well-appointed residence, but can't hide his excitement when he discovers the luxurious bath there. And since his aunt (who adopted him at the age of eight) has forbidden him further access to her place on the outskirts of Paris, Driss is homeless anyway. Second, Driss had already hinted the previous day that red-haired Magalie, Philippe's secretary, offered a wonderful incentive for him to become Phillippe's employee. This is confirmed by Driss's wide grin shown in a frontally staged shot, which then is revealed as Magalie's point of view.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

The enormous success of *Intouchables* was obviously due to the pairing of the odd couple, Driss and Philippe, who seem polar opposites in every regard. I write "seem", because at times Driss deliberately plays the role of the ignorant fool who knows nothing about the "high culture" taste of the well-educated class. When Philippe says that he is not familiar with Driss's favourite funk/disco music, he asks the (fake) applicant whether *he* knows Chopin, Schubert or Berlioz. Driss replies that he doubts that Philippe is an expert on Berlioz and asks him which building he knows. Philippe recognizes the mistake with a slightly condescending smile: Berlioz was a famous 19th-century composer, writer and critic before his name was used for a neighbourhood. Driss's ignorance proves to Philippe that their worlds are far apart, but then Driss adds that he actually does know who Berlioz was, and accuses Philippe of lacking any sensitivity for humour: his mistake was a deliberate gambit to trick the aristocrat into confirming his short-sighted prejudices.

This joke may be one of the reasons why Philippe decides to hire Driss as his aide. Driss is subjected to ideological mind-sets on the part of others, but so, too, does Philippe himself, now that he is handicapped and confined to a wheelchair. The rich man realizes that both he and the unemployed black man are *intouchables*, i.e., they are excluded from the current social system, each in his own way. Poor economic circumstances restrict Driss's possibilities, and Philippe now always has to depend on others for even the slightest of social acts. When the art dealer Antoine warns Philippe that his new assistant is a loose cannon who has served six months in prison for a robbery, Philippe expresses his annoyance at Antoine's attitude. He enjoys the fact that Driss often hands over the telephone, which shows that he forgets about his boss's condition, whereas everyone else is always so cautious not to hurt the feelings of a disabled man. Indeed, Driss does not flinch from making "merciless" jokes. He throws snowballs at Philippe, though the latter cannot defend himself from them. When Philippe wants a chocolate, Driss says crassly: Sorry, no arms, no candy, and starts to laugh out loud. This is a joke, for Driss will give him a chocolate after all, but this is the kind of crude humour that is excluded from Philippe's politically correct environment. And the evasion of such jokes implicitly confirms Philippe in his unfortunate role as patient. According to Antoine, the "frivolous and aggressive" Driss has no compassion towards other people, but that is what Philippe is after, someone who has no pity for him, someone who, in other words, does not harbour the standard prejudices and attitudes towards the disabled. Either Driss ignores Philippe's illness, or he confronts him about his immobility in an excessive manner.

Philippe prefers both approaches over the usual politeness of his "friends". Every year, these friends organize a surprise party for him – which is anything

but a surprise for Philippe, although he feigns amazement time and again. This party, he tells Driss, merely functions as an obligatory check on whether he is still around. Everything runs smoothly, but all the guests are bored to death. This confession by Philippe is, of course, grist for the mill for Driss, who makes banter about the classical performances by the ensemble invited into Philippe's residence ("This is Tom and Jerry, isn't it?"). Driss then interrupts the party by making the guests listen, via an iPhone, to *his* music: "Boogie Wonderland" by Earth, Wind & Fire. He shows his talent at soft-shoe dancing, and he succeeds in encouraging most of the guests to make dance movements. Quite predictably, the whites do not move very rhythmically, and Philippe is visibly amused at the unplanned dance spectacle. This scene not only illustrates how Driss's main function is to spice up the lives of white characters, but it also hints at Philippe's malicious pleasure.

In his seminal study *Le rire*, the French philosopher Henri Bergson has argued that a comic effect is produced when a human being, precisely in an attempt to show off his vividness and agility, reveals his unease with his body and thus begins to appear machine-like. "Something mechanical [is] encrusted upon the living", according to Bergson. The dance in *Intouchables* is presumed to give evidence of a certain loosening up on the part of the white guests, but either stiffness gets the upper hand or a lack of control is displayed, as in the case of the overenthusiastic Albert, who falls on the ground. A major reason why people prefer to adhere to rigid conventions is that ceremonial behaviour ensures the inertia of the body. An inert body can still keep up an air of dignity, but Driss's presence challenges the guests to surrender to a mobility that exceeds their physical skills. This overestimation of their capacities is funny in the eyes of the onlookers, and Philippe in particular, who is condemned to permanent immobility. This example shows the "cold cruelty" at the heart of Bergson's theory.[9] Laughter often means someone is being laughed at; thanks to Driss, the guests turn themselves into objects of ridicule, to Philippe's sheer delight.

In laughter, as Bergson has famously asserted, "we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity".[10] The comic "demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart".[11] It is essential for Bergson that we temporarily suspend feelings of sympathy, fear

9 Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London, Sage, 2005, p. 128.

10 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, London, Macmillan, 1935, p. 4.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

or pity for the person being laughed at, since such feelings might prevent us from enjoying our schadenfreude. From this perspective, Philippe's laughter at the guests is, to adopt a quote from Bergson, "a kind of social 'ragging'".[12] The guests try hard to execute rhythmic bodily movements in public, but they fail hilariously. Hence, their bodies are revealed as no more than, to quote Bergson, "a heavy and cumbersome vesture, a kind of irksome ballast".[13] In addition to such open displays of automatism, Bergson regards earnestness in particular to be laughable. In his eyes, a person can become comical when he is deadly serious, or rather, when he is overdoing his serious attitude. Any good quality can be regarded as ludicrous as soon as one performs it in an overly rigid fashion. When a man prides himself on a virtue he possesses – thorough honesty or extreme cleverness, for example – he withdraws from society into himself. And precisely at this point does he become open to ridicule.[14] Such a man may think he is an emblem of a social ideal – of morality, of wisdom, or whatever – but in the eyes of others, his self-righteous attitude is a token of how *un*sociable he is actually being.

To reveal the rigid earnestness of Antoine, Philippe offers to sell him a painting for the "modest" price of 11.000 euro. Philippe tells his colleague that the painter is an up-and-coming artist who has already had a show in London and is about to exhibit in Berlin. In fact, the painting was made by Driss, who, feeling contempt for an abstract canvas with only "red stains on white", claims he can produce something better than a "bloody nose": he will even add some "blue". Antoine will buy the painting, because he is too anxious that Philippe will later tell him "I told you so", in the event that the work triples in value. In this episode, Driss once again functions as a perfect vehicle for Philippe to ridicule his "serious" environment. Thanks to Driss's painting, he can lay bare the pompousness of Antoine, who is unable to distinguish a true work of contemporary art from some amateur's intuitively made painting.

Careless as Curious

So far I have sketched Philippe as a Bergsonian jester who laughs when people cut a sorry figure. Driss is not only Philippe's medical aide, but above all the vehicle for his pranks. When Driss aggressively schools the neighbour whose car is always incorrectly parked, Philippe sanctions the humiliation by whispering

12 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
13 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
14 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

to himself: "That's the right method". He does not protest when Driss, who does not even have a driver's licence, is speed-racing and endangering the traffic around him. When they are stopped by a police car, Driss bets Philippe two hundred euro that they will get an escort. Philippe fakes an attack and Driss feigns anger at the delay in getting him some very urgent medical care, and thus they are given their escort. In evident disdain for the authorities, the odd couple starts laughing, having fooled not only the police but also the male nurses who have come running with a stretcher. Philippe and Driss comport themselves as if normal rules of conduct were not applicable to them, and as such they are inviolate, *intouchables*.

Philippe's penchant for inviolability seems a reaction to the traumatic experience of his wife's death. After smoking a joint, he tells Driss that Alice was the love of his youth and, after five tragic miscarriages, she was stricken with cancer. Since he had always been fond of extreme sports and competition, Philippe went paragliding, an activity that has the added advantage that it allows one literally to look down on others. He took a deliberate risk of going paragliding in bad weather, perhaps courting an accident so that he might also suffer pain, like his terminally ill wife. The outing resulted in two fractured cervical vertebrae. Ever since the accident, he concludes, he can fly only in his mind. Thus, it makes sense that Philippe would hire, of all people, Driss as his aide, since this rich patient is not a man who likes to play it safe. A "frivolous" guy such as Driss still appeals to him because of his maladjusted behaviour, his practical jokes, and his disregard for upper-class conventions.

Since Driss is indifferent to social conventions, he can represent for Philippe an *élan vital*, a positive "vital force", a "life impulse". I use the term *élan vital* here because Philippe's thinking seems to chime with Bergson's assumptions about laughter. Let me repeat that we tend to laugh at people who show visible bodily awkwardness in a way that undermines their dignity (such as the guests at Philippe's party). In addition, we laugh at those who like to keep up appearances at all costs (such as Antoine). In her analysis of Bergson's *Le rire*, however, Zupančič argues that "comedy is a constant reversing of (…) two series".[15] She regards Bergson's position as a restricted conception, because deficiency and imperfection are too exclusively associated with an inflexible body and a serious attitude. According to Zupančič, who works within a Hegelian-Lacanian paradigm, this position is not sufficiently dialectical. "Is not the comic", she asks herself, "precisely the reversal in which we come upon something rigid at the very core of life, and upon something vivid at the very core of inelasticity?"[16]

15 Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2008, p. 113.

16 *Ibid.*, 115.

Such a reversal is also at work in *Intouchables*, once we realize that Philippe has turned Driss into the object of a practical joke. I am not referring here to instances of direct address, as when Driss has to perform such "unmanly" tasks as helping the patient put on his support socks: "Did you ever consider working as a beautician?" he teases Driss. The real key to the comic potential of *Intouchables* resides in the job interview at the beginning. Magalie is interrogating the applicants, and in an episodic sequence we hear their socially appropriate replies. Once we get a reverse shot, we see Philippe sitting in the back, looking stern and displeased. Apart from the slightly condescending laugh he makes when Driss mistakes the composer Berlioz for a neighbourhood, Philippe smiles only twice. The first smile appears when Driss, asked whether he has any other motivations for his application besides the required signature, answers that one of his many motivations sits right in front of him, and then winks at Magalie. We are inclined to think that Philippe smiles because Driss's flirtatious remark and gesture visibly embarrass Magalie. In other words, she feels slightly uncomfortable here, but as I will explain later, the situation is slightly more complicated and, in fact, this frank remark is decisive for the hiring of Driss. Philippe's second smile shows itself after Driss asks why "Mrs. Motivation" cannot put down a signature. Philippe says she is not authorized, and Magalie reacts with a puzzled look. That is a pity, Driss jokes, for she could have written down her mobile phone number as well – a quip that once more elicits a smile from Philippe.

Driss's impertinent advances towards women clash crucially with Philippe's thoughtful and gentle approach to courtship. After spending twenty-five years with the late Alice, Philippe is now engaged in an old-fashioned mail correspondence with a woman named Eléonore, in which he uses archaic linguistic expressions. So be it, declares Driss, but he considers it outrageous that Philippe does not know after six months of writing how Eléonore's voice sounds or what she looks like: "Perhaps she is fat and ugly, or disabled?" Philippe, nonetheless, wants to continue his epistolary relationship. Even though the bold Driss will help Philippe to achieve a breakthrough, which will eventually result in a meeting with Eléonore in Dunkirk, this sort of support was not at the back of Philippe's mind when he hired the black man. That was an advantageous collateral effect, at best. My point is that Philippe was simply intrigued by Driss's flirtatious behaviour as such.

As soon as he becomes Philippe's aide, Driss is convinced that his charm will win over Magalie. He invites her to take a bath with him, and when she agrees, he confidently starts to undress. No, it is a joke, Magalie says, and a bare-chested Driss walks after her in an attempt to persuade her. The maid

Yvonne tells Driss that Magalie's relationship with "Fred" is not as solid as it used to be, and Driss immediately guesses that this is due to his presence – "she is probably talking about me?" Yvonne leaves him harbouring his delusion. When Driss goes back to his *banlieue* to resolve a matter for the young Adama, he at last meets Magalie's lover upon saying goodbye: "Fred" is Frédérique, and it becomes clear to Driss that a joke is being played upon him.

When he quits his job, Driss cannot resist telling Yvonne that he appreciated the joke, but he adds: "I always wondered how she could withstand me". One could take this remark as a form of self-irony, were it not that Driss is in fact being quite serious, though his comment is made in the form of a joke. He truly believes that the only women who do not swoon at his appearance are lesbians. The moment Magalie introduces Frédérique, Driss says: "Okay, I understand, so no kiss goodbye", and gives her his hand. Magalie pulls him close and whispers in his ear: "Fancy a threesome?" Driss considers the option in earnest: "I do not have time right now, but I can return in the evening". To avoid any misunderstanding, Magalie then adds, "Just kidding", for it does not seem to dawn on Driss that she is joking. This brief dialogue exposes that Driss is so conceited about his qualities as a virile persuader that any erotically titillating suggestion is taken as a serious request.

Driss may be a buffoon all the time, except when it concerns his machismo. The two times we see Philippe laugh in response to Driss's remarks directed at Magalie during the job interview were instances of taking pleasure in advance. His smiles can be taken as an early acknowledgement of Driss's weak spot. Driss has some advantages over Philippe, for with his athletic body he can be as cheeky as Philippe would like to be, but at the same time Driss's excessive masculine pride can easily be hurt. Of course, Philippe knows that his secretary is involved in a lesbian relationship: Driss will fail to conquer her no matter how hard he tries. Despite Driss's vivaciousness, Philippe has already realized that the physically virile man would meet with defeat. Here Philippe has prepared for Driss a homosocial joke: better postpone any real confrontation with a pen pal than be rejected by a headstrong woman.

So far, I have presented *Intouchables* as a comedy-drama of mutual joking: Driss feels comfortable in his role as comedian, but Philippe also plays a trick upon him. This, however, is not the end of the story, for Driss turns the tables once more: worse than being rejected by a woman is to have avoided the risk of being turned down altogether. By driving Monsieur Philippe to Dunkirk, Driss ensures that a meeting between the patient and his pen pal takes place. We see that Driss has a wide grin on his face, and though we do not overhear the conversation inside, the final lines suggest a happy outcome.

In addition to the mutual joking, the film, as befits this kind of feel-good drama it is, has taught its protagonists some valuable lessons, or so it seems. Driss teaches Philippe to be a bit more outgoing towards women, and Philippe will get his "reward": he will remarry and become the father of two daughters. Thanks to Philippe, Driss will become a bit more thoughtful, as is shown in his more polite stance towards a double-parked car and his smart replies at a job interview.[17] But insofar as we might be inclined to regard these changes as "positive" results, they have been achieved by questionable means. If one were to emphasize these questionable means, one could sum up a critique of *Intouchables* as follows: in its depiction of the two men's happy cohabitation, the film cuts across social classes, but only by capitalizing upon a hackneyed representation of the black man. Recently released from jail, Driss shows himself to be misogynistic, aggressive, impatient, and he can gain better prospects only by serving a rich white man. In a vehement review in the influential daily *Variety*, the American critic Jay Weissberg denounced *Intouchables* as a film which "flings about the kind of Uncle Tom racism one hopes has permanently exited American screens", and castigated Omar Sy's Driss as a "performing monkey (…) barely removed from the jolly house slave of yore".[18] As Michael notes, this review worked like a red rag to a bull for French critics and bloggers. They rapidly closed ranks, and in its online version *Libération* even walked back its earlier critique of the film.[19] At the time the *Variety* review was published, *Intouchables* had not met with unanimous enthusiasm among French critics, but this utterly damning review had a rebound effect, prompting a consensus which can be paraphrased: those Americans with their so-called politically correct attitude should not condemn "our" *Intouchables*, for its racial politics is no worse than that of many American comedies.

In an online video posted under the name *De cultuurkelder*, three Dutch debaters (Kasper C. Jansen, Youri Dingemans, Michiel Lieuwma) were very sceptical about the achievements of *Intouchables*, but after their lengthy complaints about its lazy script[20] and the dismal representation of the black man,

17 During a job interview at a shipping company, he is considered to be an uneducated applicant until he starts talking about alexandrine verses and a reproduction of Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* hanging on the wall.

18 Jay Weissberg, "Film Review: *Untouchable*", *Variety*, 29 September 2011.

19 Michael, "Interpreting *Intouchables*: Competing Transnationalisms in Contemporary French Cinema", *op. cit.*, pp. 133–34.

20 The debaters of *De cultuurkelder* were annoyed by the many ellipses in the script. To give two brief examples: Driss insists that he will not put on the support socks over Philippe's legs, but in a subsequent scene he is already doing it. Driss will definitely not

Lieuwma remarked that the latter critique was perhaps too "Westernized". Should we not treat this film with some "respect", and judge *Intouchables* according to the principles of "positive discrimination"? Lieuwma wondered. When Driss deliberately pours hot tea over Philippe's insensitive leg, he is careless, we tend to say, but no, in fact he is curious; he is an impulsive asshole on many occasions, but no, he defends the interests of his employer; his fast driving is aimed at fooling the police and endangers traffic, but perhaps we had better see his bluff as an example of his resourcefulness; he is impolite and misogynistic, but why not say that he is forthright and plain-speaking? Such a semantic analysis as suggested by Lieuwma is not just some funny game or verbal sleight of hand, I want to argue. Without intending to cancel out the negative associations about black men provoked by Driss's attitudes, it is in the nature of a comedy, at least this comedy, to allow space for a less "mechanistic" reading.

French films that address characters in the Parisian suburbs usually have a grim and bleak atmosphere, as in *La haine* (Matthieu Kassovitz, 1995) or more recently *Dheepan* (Jacques Audiard, 2015). In opting for a gloomy, culturally pessimistic template, these films offer scenarios that invite spectators to reflect why the tragedies they dramatize occur. A comedy, by contrast, "practically never tries to explain why something happened, but it is extremely adept at showing how something functions" in society, thereby ignoring the "psychological depths and motives" of characters.[21] Comedy is very concrete,[22] since it is concerned not with past causes or future effects but only with a present situation, with the added advantage that it permits itself to put subtleties aside[23]. So, the main merit of *Intouchables* is its address of a problematic subject – the cohabitation of a rich white man and a poor black man – in the form of a hilarious comedy which disparages politically correct attitudes. If we condemn the film strictly on political grounds, we risk becoming like those "decent" friends for whom Philippe feels contempt. Having said that, it is still legitimate

go paragliding, he says, but in a subsequent scene he is already ready for take-off. So, they complain, on several occasions in the film the actual depiction of a conflict is evaded.

21 Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy, op cit.*, pp. 176–77.

22 For Zupančič, concreteness distinguishes comedy from tragedy. In comedy, a "stereotypical" character as an abstract universality is set in motion and, through various accidents and events, such a character descends to a concrete universality. Charlie Chaplin is the "Lone Prospector" in *The Gold Rush* (1925) and the "Worker" in *Modern Times* (1936), and he will develop into "prospectorship", into "workership". In tragedy, it is the other way around, for we always start with a very concrete and strong personality, a significant individual who cannot be reduced to a universal or generic name (p. 45).

23 Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy, op. cit.*, p. 176.

to criticize the film for its representation of the happy jester Driss as being careless, reckless, impolite, and submissive, but at the same time it is in the nature of a comedy to cover a certain bandwidth. And thus, I would conclude, *Intouchables* also invites its viewers to read careless as curious, impolite as forthright, and submissive as dedicated.

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