

DETACHMENT – IL DISTACCO

Peter Anderson

I am going to talk about 7 aspects of the film. First of all, about the film director; secondly about the film itself; thirdly about the Henry Barthes, the main character; fourthly Erika, the young prostitute, after that the subject of teaching; and the cinema as a medium; then about the importance of reading; and finally a quote from American literature mentioned in the film: 'The Fall of the House of Usher' by Edgar Allan Poe. I have translated a selection of words in this talk and given the pronunciation of others.

The Director

The Director Tony Kaye in Adrien Brody's (Henry the teacher) opinion has a **spontaneity /spontaneità/** which is inspirational and according to Sami Gayle (Erika the young prostitute) he allows actors and actresses artistic freedom, to have the sky as their limit and go as far as they possibly can.

The Film

It is a complex film: it is a real yet stylized look at the precarious state we exist in; the failings of public school (in the sense of state school - in Britain public schools - are private!) the failings of people's lives in the home front and our ability to do better. It may seem a very **grim** (sgradevole; orribile) picture of the film but it is also a very hopeful story. Through an awareness of all the **pitfalls** (trappole; insidie; difficoltà) around us, we have to pay attention to the fragility of the life around us. The struggle we face is what it takes to become somebody, to get out of the sea of pain, our sea of troubles. Some of us believe we can make a difference, then we wake up and realize we have failed and we have let everyone down including ourselves.

Adrien Brody

Henry **Barthes /ba:θ/** (actor Adrien Brody) is a **substitute teacher** ('supplente' also temporary substitute, sub, temporary teacher, supply teacher) who is dealing with the **flaws** (flaw: difetto, manchevolezza, pecca) of the education system as well as the flaws in his life. He suffered tremendously as a boy and created a defense mechanism which is universal – people retreat whether it is in their own minds or physically from others. They retreat when they are hurt by others and in certain situations. That is not the ideal situation for evolving. It creates a detached state of mind – hence the title of the film **DETACHMENT** (distacco, estraniamento). He manages to overcome this through the story, through his encounters with two young girls who are meaningful in his life. He is very generous in trying to help them and within that process of helping them he saves himself and pulls himself out of his own misery and feeling of loneliness. It is the portrait of human beings who are just human and **flawed** (che hanno difetti) and they are victims and enemies to themselves at times. We can relate to characters like Henry. Henry suffered as a child and retreated because hurt by others. When you turn this into art – a film, a painting or a song you can turn these negative things into something very beautiful, meaningful and moving that speaks to others and helps us all feel connected and less isolated. We can relate to similarities we have and we are all overcoming obstacles, we all have difficulties in our lives that prevent us from being present right here and now.

Sami Gayle

One of the two young women he helps is Erika who is a teenage prostitute. He picks her up and leads her to a better way of living. This was her first film as a young actress and she found the role challenging, **raw** (grezzo, crudo), **gritty** (showing life as it really is, even when it is not pleasant or attractive – crudamente realistico). She had Adrien there to mentor her through the entire process. Erika is innocent; she is a prostitute and she is **edgy** (tesa, nervosa, inquieta, spigolosa) and **rough** (rude, rozza, sgarbata, scontrosa), but she is just an innocent little girl who needs help and Henry gives her the help she needs.

Teaching

In the film two points are raised regarding school. Firstly, it is difficult to teach complexity as a black and white text, or in a school curriculum (programma scolastico). Secondly, there should be more **guidance** (orientamento, assistenza, consulenza but also guida, condotta, governo) at school but the main dilemma is that there is not enough guidance at home. You are just picking up little bits along the way and hanging out with your friends or getting into trouble. Then you are not destined to much of a hopeful future or a way of solving these problems **thoughtfully** (in maniera meditare, seria, profonda). The key is to have mentors and people who can help instill values.

The Cinema as a Medium

In the film, there is a certain degree of truth and a certain degree that is **fabricated** (inventare a scopo d'inganno; architettare; falsificare – Macm Adv to fabricate: to make up a story or a piece of information in order to make someone believe something that is not true). We live in a world where a lot is fabricated. Henry aspires to find the truth and is conscious of the dilemma. His character's **diatribe** /**daɪəˈtraɪb**/ about that: we are fed a lot of things that are not authentic and based on fact; it is up to us to be able to differentiate that for ourselves; it is up to us not to perpetuate that. Adrien wants to find material that is based on truth and be a spokesman about the material. He likes to speak honestly about his thoughts and feelings and much less about the superficial aspects that are sometimes asked of him.

Reading

To defend ourselves from all the trash that is thrown at us every day and fight against the dullness and **torpor** /**tɔːpə**/, we must learn to read to stimulate our own imagination, to cultivate our own consciousness, our own belief systems. We all need these skills to defend and to preserve our own minds. This is Henry's message to his students.

Edgar Allan Poe

And, finally, a bit of reading! I shall round off the talk with the beginning of one of Edgar Allan Poe's best tales in 'Tales of Mystery and Imagination': the title is 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. The House of Usher is not only an old castle in ruin, it is a state of being.

'During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. ... I looked upon the simple landscape of the domain, upon the bleak

walls, upon the white trunks of decayed trees, with an utter depression of soul. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart.'

So do read in English and do encourage your children, your pupils, your students to read in English!