

## Vital involvement versus ultimate confusion: two contrasting portrayals of dementia in *the* movies *The Father* and *Floride*

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the possibility and importance of cinematographic representations of dementia that offer an alternative to its popular medicalized stigma. This is explored by comparing two film adaptations of the same theatrical play by Florian Zeller, *The Father*. While *The Father's* (2020) film version by Zeller himself does not depart from the notion of dementia as a story of decline, Le Guay's *Floride* (2015) focuses on the main character's ability for imaginative storytelling. Through narrative analysis, we demonstrate that while Anthony's confusion in *The Father* is an utterly despairing sign of cognitive decline, that very confusion is a vehicle for playful imagination in *Floride*. The vitality underlying such acts of unbridled imagination, along with a matter-of-fact approach to the interruptions of dementia, challenges the negative, deeply seated stigmas of persons living with dementia. Juxtaposed in this manner, these two adaptations provide a unique opportunity to re-examine the role of popular culture in dementia discourse.

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## Introduction

Mainstream cinema has, in recent years, often poured smooth and standardized portrayals of dementia onto our screens (Capp 2020; Capstick et al. 2015; Cohen-Shalev & Marcus 2012; Medina 2018). Swinnen (2013: 113–114) contends that those films “typically render the story of a disease in progress that reaches its nadir in the time span of the narrative and use metaphors, such as darkness, to add to the story of decline.” These films often reinforce dominant negative attitudes toward people with dementia (Wearing 2023: 102). Less often, but more noteworthy, are attempts to pursue more complex depictions of this predicament that have become more pervasive with growing life expectancy. Our essay joins those of other scholars (e.g. Medina [2018]), who show how world-cinema films such as *Cortex* (Boukhrief & Moreau 2008), *The Good Herbs* (Novaro 2010), *Poetry* (Chang-dong 2010), *Pandora's Box* (Ustaoglu & Kaygusuz 2008), and *Elizabeth is Missing* (Walsh et al. 2019) depict Alzheimer's disease differently than mainstream films (Cohen-Shalev & Marcus 2012). Films can present an alternative understanding that highlights not the sickness and its stigma but the person living with Alzheimer's at the forefront, as central rather than marginalized characters (Chivers 2011).

In 2020, French playwright Florian Zeller took his successful stage play of 2012, *The Father*, onto the big screen, with widespread critical and public applause (Zeller & Hampton 2020). Yet, *The Father* is not the first film adaptation of the play, but the second. The first adaptation was the largely ignored French film *Floride* (Le Guay et al. 2015), directed by Philip Le Guay, starring the French veteran Jean Rochefort as the father and Sandrine Kiberlain as his daughter. Unfortunately, this first cinematic adaptation of Zeller's play received little critical acclaim and public success outside of France. Zeller disapproved of Le Guay's film, claiming it did not even remotely resemble his play (Beasley 2021), but rather “what helped when I came to make *The Father* was that it showed me exactly what I didn't want to do” (Gilbey 2021). Taking it upon himself to direct

a new screen version had been, possibly, a step toward assuring that the success his play had on stage would repeat itself on the screen.

### *The Father* versus *Floride*: Narrative and Counter-Narrative of Living with Dementia

Cinema, especially mainstream Hollywood cinema, often represents prevalent perceptions of dementia as an unremitting and irreversible personal and familial disaster, packaging together old age, cognitive disintegration, and a fatal identity loss. This is arguably due to the dominant medicalized stigma of dementia (Low & Purwaningrum 2020) and the capitalistic pressures that have created the modern youth-obsessed consumer culture propelled by Hollywood and American mass culture (Addison 2003; Ewen 1976). Books and films about dementia almost all tell a story of progressive decline and death, ending in institutionalization or the death of the person with dementia (Low & Purwaningrum 2020). Feelings commonly associated with dementia are fear, shame, compassion, and guilt, and depictions often result in a sense of social distance (Low & Purwaningrum 2020). Much of the cultural production around dementia reinforces rather than resists stigmatization (Capstick et al. 2015). In highlighting such characteristics of dementia, cinema thus becomes yet another “mask of aging” (Featherstone & Hepworth 1991). Popular films often depict midlife, censored, and stereotypical visions of old age. The schism between the socially and artistically fabricated mask and the actual experience of aging become deeper and deeper, save for a few exceptional examples, which are the focus of this essay. While one could study the cinematic mask of aging from a sociological perspective, questioning our society and its attitudes toward aging, it is also important to ask how particular films can enhance our understanding of and insight into the conditions of old age and especially of living with dementia. Films with an alternative view of people living with dementia can substantiate the recent scholarly challenge of the view that dementia inevitably leads to loss of self (Sabat & Collins 1999) and illustrate the “significant shift from the focus on tragic decline” in the stories we tell ourselves about dementia (Basting 2009: 48). This shift challenges the notion that people who live with dementia, Alzheimer’s,

and other types become hollow shells without a trace of personhood left in them.

Le Guay's adaptation takes such an alternative path. While the octogenarian protagonist's confusion in *The Father* is an utterly despairing sign of a mind lost, that very confusion is a vehicle for playful imagination in *Floride*. Whereas *The Father's* dramatic and psychological vision immerses the viewer in the anguish of its lead character, *Floride* capitalizes on his unimpaired, perhaps even augmented ability for storytelling, whose imaginative qualities are of considerable survival value (Heeschen 2001). The humorous vitality underlying such acts of unbridled imagination, along with a "matter-of-fact" dramatically low-key approach to the disruptions of dementia, introduces a little-recognized dimension of what we call "playful confusion," challenging deeply rooted cultural beliefs of disablement.

*The Father* is, in essence, a faithful adaptation from the medium of theater to that of film. On the other hand, *Floride* takes advantage of the liberties of adaptation, where the text becomes a pretext, and the change in medium metamorphoses the picture. It results in a change of genre: Le Guay's adaptation thus transforms Zeller's play from a tragic drama to one with an almost comic temperament (sometimes defined by film guides as "a comedy," although one should remember that the concept of comedy has a more complex history than one that simply describes something humorous). While literary and cinematic scholars (Langford 2005) have suggested that genre has a role in shaping and creating meaning, except for specific genres (e.g. Westerns or Gangster), most cinematic genres do not necessarily have well-defined visual cues or iconography. This limitation reveals the fact that there are no uniform parameters for genre delimitation, and any genre film can easily "cross-breed" (Tseng 2017). Genre analysis, therefore, will not be the focus of the ensuing analysis.

### "Prize-Winning" with a Price Tag: *The Father's* Reception as a Discourse of Glorification

*The Father's* plot revolves around Anthony (Sir Anthony Hopkins), a former engineer in his eighties, who does not want to admit that he is

experiencing the first symptoms of dementia. His daughter Anne (Olivia Colman), worried about the deterioration of his condition, entrusts him to one caregiver after the other. Still, each regularly ends up leaving her job due to the man's hostile and annoying attitude. This attitude takes the form among other "embarrassments," of a desire that gradually becomes an obsession: to see his other daughter, Lucy, who had died in an accident years before.

*The Father* was applauded in both professional and public circles (Rai & Banerjee 2022; Sawicka et al. 2022; Wijdicks 2021). Enthusiastic responses were directed primarily at Hopkins' performance, his costar Olivia Colman, Florian Zeller's direction, Christopher Hampton's script adaptation, and the sophisticated cinematography translating the protagonist's progressive confusion of times and places. These accolades have won *The Father* a couple of Oscars for adapted screenplay and best actor. As for acting prizes, Anthony Hopkins is the most recent in a list of winners, from Robert Hirsch in the original Paris stage production, Kenneth Cranham in London's West End, and Frank Langella on Broadway, among other more local cases. One critic suggested that the figure of the older man with dementia is a-priori destined for eminent actors:

Those who oscillate in the blink of an eye between the powerful and the frail, the charismatic and the extinct, from the delightfully vivid to the tragically fragile, and from the ominous and admirable to the pathetic (Rave 2021).

This ubiquitous enthusiasm is suspect. It raises the possibility of fending off a deeply disturbing anguish at the hero's suffering with the glorification of his theatrical proxy, keeping the devastation of full confrontation with the reality represented on the screen at a safe distance. Keeping the harsh reality at bay is, of course, incongruous with the explicit effort toward total spectator immersion in the mind of a person who lives with dementia, frequently considered the singular psycho-aesthetic achievement of the film (Capp 2021). Immersion can become a double-edged sword, as it stands in the way of reflection. The last scene of *The Father*, perhaps intentionally, ensures that the audience remains securely fastened to the seat belts of immersion through the shocking and shaking experience of Anthony's terminal defeat and his return to dependency. Being powerfully drawn into the hero's emotional distress overshadows

and discourages critical judgment and even de-legitimizes an effort at a more balanced appraisal. Feeling pre-empts thinking. Identifying with the protagonist's predicament excludes other responses and may even induce guilt in failing to emote.

Jean Rochefort's Claude (the equivalent of Anthony) in *Floride* did not win a prize, which makes the distinguished French veteran (this was his last role) an exception to the rule, not attributable to the film's deficiencies (there are a mere few), but more likely to his acting style, reflecting the conception of *Floride* as a whole. Rochefort's approach is the opposite of Anthony Hopkins: understated, un-theatrical, patently and deliberately indeterminate and ambiguous. As much as Hopkins' portrayal is complexly nuanced, it is based on a positively defined diagnosis. His struggle against confusion and forgetfulness is a direct outcome of his neuropsychological condition, and so is his extreme agony, which the audience is supposed to approximate in emulation. His dementia, while it may not be clinically detailed, is a clear-cut categorical "case." The illness threatens his continuous sense of identity, making him half the man he had been until in the end, he becomes the infant he had been. The loss of existential security is under constant assault. Dementia as a primarily medical syndrome is never in question, irrevocably determining the psychological price for both the people living with dementia and their caregivers.

It is exactly this vision of dementia that is questioned and undermined in the course of watching *Floride*. While Anthony Hopkins, as the eponymous protagonist of *The Father*, accentuates in his portrayal the signs of decline associated with the medicalized stigma of dementia, Jean Rochefort, his equivalent in *Floride*, seems to inhabit a liminal subjective territory of accumulative uncertainty. While the infantilized Anthony receives maternal care from a female staff member who promises him a walk in the park later in the day (the camera turns to the window, a shot of the park outside that does not include the protagonist who lives with dementia), Claude goes to the window, looks outside, and says, "I didn't know they had these trees in Florida." Apart from the bitterly comic moment of continued disorientation, he again re-orientates his still extant self in a continued imaginative space that he imports into the new physical space of the nursing institution. It is an act of mental reappropriation of physical reality and, as such, a

proclamation of survival within the closing constraints of the mental condition of dementia, a flight via imagination from the gravitation of progressive dementia.

*Floride* does not obey the cultural concept of a total loss of self and the unalloyed suffering synonymous with the medicalized trope of “dementia.” Nor does the film take the alternative extreme, the “forget memory” vision (Basting 2009), emphasizing the importance of activities that focus only on the present to improve the lives of persons with dementia. Rochefort’s Claude hovers in an existentially transitional space, making it almost impossible to positively define his status, either medically or psychologically. This particular type of confusion regarding the epistemological status of dementia, rather than the confusion commonly attributed to dementia, may be a bewildering experience for many viewers, including medically oriented scholars, as it challenges deep-seated and widespread perceptions of dementia. It calls for a measure of tolerance of ambiguity that goes against expectations for clearly defined characterizations in cultural products such as films. In an ironic twist, Claude’s well-being, or the very plausibility of well-being in the context of dementia, works against his perceived credibility.

While in no way underplaying the harsh realities of dementia, Claude does not “lose everything,” to quote Zeller (Gilbey 2021). It is at this point that Le Guay departs from the original stage play. In adapting the play to the screen, Le Guay literally leaves the stage, does away with the fourth wall, and opens up the vista to include the world outside in all its variety and Alpine beauty (the film was shot in the environment of Lake Annecy). In contrast, Anthony’s world in *The Father* is limited to the enclosed space/stage of his apartment, and a precariously inconstant and diffused space at that, losing some details while keeping others as his disintegrating mind meanders between the real and the illusory. This difference is also illustrated by the different use of lighting in the two films. *The Father* focuses on the inside of things (in terms of physical and mental space), an inwardness illustrated by a dim twilight reflecting the “dying of the light.” In *Floride*, in contrast, the light flows in and out of the protagonist’s dwelling place. The outdoor scenes were shot in natural light, and the film, on the whole, is brightly lit, illustrating the “bright side” of life under the shadow of dementia.

### Immersion: Asset or Liability?

According to Zeller, in an interview with Beasley (2021), the idea of *The Father* was to put the audience in a unique position, as if the audience was going through a labyrinth questioning everything – what is real, what is not real? – as if we were, in a way, in Anthony’s mind. *The Father* thus becomes an exercise in virtual verisimilitude, a double “tour de force”: a performance of acting and production of virtual reality, putting the audience inside the mind of a person who lives with dementia, arguably a futile enterprise since there is no way of really knowing, and since that mind is a-priori culturally constructed (Kitwood 1997).

In the same interview, director Zeller said:

I wanted *The Father* to be not only a story about a man losing his bearings but **an experience** – and the experience **of what it could mean to lose everything** (emphases added), including your own bearings as a viewer (Beasley 2021).

Zeller seems to be interested in people with dementia more as a metaphor for the condition of losing everything. Thus, taking so much trouble to immerse the viewer in the experience of dementia, the intricate mechanism that prompts and thrusts the audience into Anthony’s psyche as his mental faculties begin to abandon him, is, in fact, a pretext for an epistemological essay in a cinematic-theatrical language of ultimate disorientation. From a literary perspective employing a disability critique, this is an example of what Mitchell and Snyder (2001) termed narrative prosthesis – how narrative functions as a type of prosthetic response to the structure of disability that it inaugurates, propounding the premise of something dysfunctional, needing fixing, some flaw in the natural order, thematized through a disabled character. In *The Father*, the “clinical features of dementia – in some far-along stage (Alzheimer’s presumably) – are accurate and simulate the feeling of descending into a strange, spatially disoriented world” (Wijdicks 2021: 987). In other words, director Zeller is after emulating a typified experience rather than understanding a person in a particular distressful situation. Not the horror of Alzheimer’s is at the center of the experience he tries to recreate, but the threat of losing one’s bearings, that is, losing a home, dear ones, identity, security,



etc. Dementia is, hence, staged as the perfect example of an immersive experience of loss.

In Zeller's stage play, the name of the man living with dementia was Andre. In Le Guay's adaptation, it was changed to Claude. In his recent film version, Zeller changed the protagonist's name again, this time to Anthony, another strategy for blurring the thin dividing line between fact and fiction. At the same time, this might serve another purpose, in the opposite direction, that of keeping the viewer at a safe distance, as it illustrates the principle of viewer duality. On the one hand, Hopkins' acumen, added to his actual age, makes for a powerful "under the skin" affinity with the character he portrays. But Anthony Hopkins is simultaneously and inseparably the actor and the 83-year-old person who approaches, as he himself made clear in an interview, the stage of threatened lucidity. Anthony the actor and Anthony the character are, thus, de-differentiated: Is it just Anthony the character or also Hopkins, the 83-year-old whose awaited failing consciousness we are witnessing?

However, the audience, put in the "unique position" experiencing losing all bearing, has one bearing that it cannot lose: the star status and cinematic persona of Sir Anthony Hopkins. The movie industry and the media have developed the "star system" whose celebrity discourse greatly influences the film's reception (deCordova 2001). Anthony, the character, is in danger of losing his identity, but Anthony, the stage and screen hero, is in no such danger. He will never be, in the consciousness of the film audience, the anonymous everyman with whom we are intended as viewers to immerse ourselves. Hopkins' theatrical performance (Mirodan 2018) adds to this effect, keeping the audience continuously aware of the distance between the man and the character. As a film icon, Anthony Hopkins is removed from the ordinary. Personhood and persona are mutually exclusive, on as well as off the stage. In other words, there is an inherent contradiction in recruiting an extraordinary theatrical persona to portray an ordinary person in a humanly excruciating position.

Zeller says he had the face of Anthony Hopkins in his mind when considering a cinematic adaptation of his play (Beasley 2021). Which "face" of Hopkins did he have in mind? The Shakespearean thespian playing *King Lear* (Eyre & Shakespeare 2018) or Hannibal Lecter of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme et al. 1991)? The emotionally inhibited head butler of *The Remains of the Day* (Ivory et al. 1993)? (The Editors of Encyclopaedia

Britannica 2022). Hopkins' film persona integrates all three, perhaps others too, and although his cinematic output certainly exceeds these performances, it is remarkable that these three roles share aspects of pathology. The inevitable awareness of the audience of Hopkins' extraordinary talent in portraying characters with pathology may have an impact on them, making the case for dementia qua pathology and a manifestation of "otherness."

Another issue that emerges from Zeller's brief interview concerns the conversion of the play into film: "I thought that the cinema, thanks to its language, could be more effective than the stage" (Beasley 2021). Zeller does not specify in what ways the screen is more effective than the stage. Is it reproducing a state of dementia? Drawing the viewer into the subjective reality that presumably constitutes the (un)consciousness of a person with dementia? In any case, Zeller is interested in the emotional effect, an exercise in an experiential approximation of a state of "total loss" uncritically and superficially believed to be definitive of dementia. The intentional emphasis on immediate emotional impacts becomes the only venue for approaching a state of cognitive impairment in general and dementia in particular. The film theatrically dramatizes the agony, thus lending support to widespread cultural perception. The more brilliant the performance, the more powerful the impact, overshadowing a more balanced appraisal of dementia.

While going a long way to creating a state of mind of perceptual disorientation and uncertainty for the viewers, *The Father* unintentionally highlights the opposite of what seems to be a state of "obstinate questioning," that is, the ontological certainty concerning the nature of dementia, its manifestations, and the direction of its trajectory. This is where *Floride* makes a difference, unsettling positivistic certainties as to the realities of dementia as a culturally constructed predicament.

### Beyond Personhood: Dementia and Personality in *Floride*

The late Jean Rochefort, 85 years old at the time of *Floride's* release, is not well-known to movie-goers outside of France. His portrayal of the leading role of an older man with dementia is undoubtedly masterful, exemplary in its use of ambivalence and understatement, qualities less immediately appealing to mainstream audiences than the grand scale, dramatically

inflected performance style of Anthony Hopkins. An alternately delighted and bewildered Claude, as embodied by Rochefort, “the amused self-acceptance of an ageing male’s misshapen body ...would appear to offer a suitable tribute to Eros and at least a temporary refuge from Thanatos.” (Dine 2022: 66 [referring to Downing 2004: 89–96]).

In the first scenes, Le Guay approaches the exposure of dementia with deliberate hesitation. At first, we think Claude is doing okay because it is made clear that he is pretending to be suffering from some form of dementia just to torment the people around him.

Hopkins’ Anthony is busy pretending to be his former, pre-dementia, own man. This pretense is certainly and unambiguously an act, a calculated, belabored exaggeration, making it a sad parody. With Rochefort, pretense is less a confusion than a strategy. He does not act the pretense but embodies it as a genuine part of his character and a manifestation of his elusive charm, even as this charm progressively evolves into social embarrassment. The veteran actor’s comic talent “allows the ageing star to extract laughter from us that is all the stronger because we are well aware that there are things we should not laugh” (Sotinel 2015 [translated into English by Dine 2022: 72])

In contrast, Hopkins, in *The Father*, artfully affects his charm, which thus becomes another devastating demonstration of his anguish. He takes great pains to redeem from the oblivion of dementia the charmer he once was and no longer is, a vanity sought in vain. This achievement depends on his artful performance, an effortless performance of an effortful charm, a failing attempt at self-preservation. On the other hand, Rochefort’s charm has an unaffected, immediate spontaneity as a part of his character he brings into the new and challenging situation. This charm is re-integrated into his coping style, still easy, but now often a subterfuge in the new game of “getting away with it,” keeping the threat of forgetfulness at bay.

Among the “objectionable” things Claude does, while Anthony significantly does not, are acts of exposure in public, “bad,” and explicit libidinous behaviors. In one scene, he urinates in front of a shocked female stranger. These visceral exposures, embarrassingly comical as they may be, have no place in *The Father*, where, as in most mainstream products sparing “indecent exposures,” more “decent” displays of impairments are preferred. Demonstrating some of the prevailing cultural views of

dementia, Anthony's dementia is depicted first and foremost through the blow to one's individual independence. First, there is a blow to intellectual independence; Anthony's paradoxical articulation, "I am intelligent," expresses wonderment and deep anxiety at the cognitive loss he is experiencing, as his human significance is synonymous with his brain. His whole being takes place in the space between his own mind (the mind he owns) and the fear of losing his mind, a space that is progressively and catastrophically reduced in the course of the play\film.

Second, there is a blow to individual independence in the sense of infantilization. Anthony is reduced to a needy, completely dependent infant, reflecting the ideological implications of understanding "old age" in general, and people living with dementia in particular. This is viewed through the lens of dependency and need that does not reflect an ethics of care (Kittay, 2011, 2012, 2019, see below), but rather a discourse of social control, liminality, and disengagement in which older people are relegated to the category of a "second childhood" dependent on others (Covey 1993). A parallel theoretical conception is found in Turner (1987), who discusses childhood and old age as homologous in terms of social liminality and disengagement, or what he calls a lack of reciprocity. The derogatory view of "the elderly" as childish and dependent and the "elderspeak" (equivalent to baby-talk) sometimes used to address older adults are an indication of a discourse of infantilization:

Through this culturally constructed model of dependency, many of those in old age and others who are infantilized—the chronically sick or disabled, for example—may be made to take a conceptual position alongside children on the margins of society (Hockey & James 1993: 13).

Claude, however, continues to maintain a vital dialogue with the world around him, absorbing its scenery and is not indifferent to sensual pleasures even as his reasoning is affected by dementia. The added, open-air scenes are more than locations; they are a statement of connectedness, sentience, and involvement. He still absorbs natural beauty and keeps company with the world and its inhabitants, even when he cannot name them or when social intelligence and social skills fail him.

*Floride* resonates with Basting's (2009) typology of cultural representations of dementia, belonging to the "not so tragic" category, as opposed to

the “tragic,” here exemplified by *The Father* (the film, even more than the original play), a critical position accurately and persuasively captured by VandenBosch (2021: 1172) in his review:

*The Father* is a brilliantly accomplished film – from its visual composition to its masterful acting. What I want to explore here is the danger that lies in the film’s unquestioning acceptance of the tragedy narrative that is already deeply embedded in our societal perception of dementia. This prevailing perception is fixated on the losses that dementia can bring, and it ignores the remaining abilities within persons who are experiencing the symptoms of dementia...

VandenBosch (2021) coaxes viewers of *The Father* to consider a different way of presenting the story of dementia in the family, one that will avoid foregrounding the horror and will resolve unrelenting anxiety in some way. It could have been a worthwhile corrective, yet stepping back and taking a broader perspective are precisely what the immersive nature of the spectator’s experience effectively disables. However, an altered, anxiety-mitigating, if unorthodox, perspective is exactly what we get with *Floride*, and it is definitely worth considering.

In *The Father*, Anthony is, in the end, reduced to a needy, completely dependent infant. As to the question posed by Wearing, “...but does this film’s stress on Anthony’s complex ongoing humanity and vulnerability, briefly experienced, in however mediated a form, by the audience, complicate the negativity of the representation?” Her answer is that *The Father* refuses such a compensatory schema (Wearing 2023: 109).

*Floride* avails another ending. When Claude’s fantastic invention crumbles and palm-covered Miami is transformed into a care center, his response is anything but devastation. It is as if he had known all along (much as the viewer had been suspecting all along) that the whole trip was a fantasy, and there is a sense of acquiescence, a “now I’m ready” admission, a quiet landing as if the mission had been fulfilled. Where *The Father* ends in shattered, excruciating misery, *Floride* ends with a wistful realization of a sad, but necessary, transition. Ironically, it is Claude who, in an extremely poignant scene where the two are drinking the wine he had refused to drink for years, offers consolations, a reconciliation, and hope to his daughter: “one should not be cross with wine or with people either ... it is a waste of time ... You are good, Carole. Are we going to see each other?” Neither is playing down the heavy demands of the

new situation, yet the fact that the two figures, the older man living with dementia and his principal caregiver, are together in the same frame offers a different prospect and, with it, a different perspective than the one offered in *The Father*. Once Anthony is moved to a place of care, Anne, his daughter, disappears from the scene, raising in the viewer the understanding that she will not come back because there is nothing left to come back to and that, at this stage, there is no care that she can provide. By contrast, Carole stays in the picture. Having left the institute after their conversation, the closing shot is a close-up of her face, looking in the direction of her father's new place, expressing not one feeling, but a mixture of sadness, gratitude, and hope, definitely not guilt and anguish. Most important, her gaze is looking forward rather than backward. She will be back, very likely, perhaps for another story her father will make up. Thus, *Floride* succeeds in "captur[ing] the frustration on both sides, but also the love that, in the end, triumphs over even their most bitter squabbling" (Kelly 2015). This can be seen as demonstrating an alternative view of dependence, one that has been propounded by Kittay (2011, 2012, 2019), who, in a series of publications, developed an ethics of care emphasizing relationality that is based on the personhood and dignity of people - including those with cognitive impairments. Such care foregrounds the affective connection between people as prior to a calculative reason that binds self-interested persons (Interview with Eva Kittay, Care Ethics Research Consortium 2021). In this view, people without disabilities are only "temporarily abled." Dependency relationships between "unequals" are often inevitable, and therefore, assistance should not be seen as a limitation, but as a resource.

### *Floride* as a Metaphor for Coping with Memory Loss Through Imaginative Fiction

More than a physical location, Florida represents a state of mind for Claude (DeBruge 2015). His other daughter, Alice, left France for the Sunshine State some 15 years earlier. Claude's imagination is very alive, even as his cognitive capacities are reduced in dealing with reality. The scenes in "the plane to Miami" as well as the scene in "Miami" have a double function. The first is to deliberately confuse the audience, thus putting it in the position of the person with dementia, a narrative vehicle also

deployed in *The Father* as a horror-magnifying device through the clever use of camera work. In *Floride*, there is another, arguably more important significance, and that is the validation of personhood through storytelling. The scenes on the plane to Florida, as well as the sequence in Miami, are at once figments of Claude's imagination and an act of make-believe, intended not to be taken too seriously. *Floride* belongs not merely to the not-so-tragic cultural representations of dementia but also to the "not so serious" category. It constantly and effortlessly moves between the factual reality of living with dementia and the unreal world of inventive imagination, each equally valid, thus homogenizing two seemingly conflicting approaches into a complex, not easily separated whole.

Rocheport's charm has an unaffected, immediate spontaneity, which he brings into the new and challenging situation he finds himself in. When he is shown the old age home, his new "home," he takes a motor wheelchair left in the corridor and drives it happily around the place, showing activity, entrepreneurship, and coping. Claude portrays the uninhibited audacity of an "enfant terrible," perhaps the alternative to age-coerced infantilization. The trope of the airplane flight is significant: going to Florida is a flight of the imagination on wings of fantasy, blurring the divide between the real and the imaginative the way children do. Claude's behavior provides an extreme contrast to dependence while also reflecting it. He is challenging to manage yet forgivable. Where *The Father* capitalizes on loss and a tragic fall, *Floride* introduces an alternative mixed bag of human responses to dementia other than fright (and hopeless fight), literally and symbolically encumbered in flight. These creative efforts to retain mental agility and memories enable a person living with dementia to "pass" in a public space, make adaptations in the home, and change their use of language and communication. Indeed, "People with dementia continue to learn new information, incorporate data, and use problem-solving skills to adapt to their changing perceptions" (Power 2014: 20). Such an approach not only explores creativity as a set of relational and negotiated practices that does not focus solely on positive benefits but also incorporates areas where tensions and challenges can emerge.

*Floride* oscillates between recognizing dementia as a psycho-biological disruption and a parallel, complementary acknowledgment of the vital involvement of the person with dementia in the world around him. Even more, Claude seems to be rising to the occasion, compensating, as it were,

for mental loss with other mental abilities, namely, unsuppressed imagination and uninhibited audacity of some kind of an “enfant terrible.” Baronnet (2021) refers to the difference between the two movies: “... the plot evolves very differently from *The Father*, *Floride* taking the liberty, as its title suggests, to imagine a whole part of the plot around a trip to Florida.”

Whether the trip to Florida is part of the diegesis or a figment of the protagonist’s imagination, a complete fabrication remains suggestively suspended until the very end. Curiously and highly relevantly, it is both. As a narrative device, scenes from the plane and from Miami appear intermittently throughout the film, tying, as it were, the scenes in Annecy. The story thus turns into a parallel narrative. As Claude’s memory and adaptive capacity regress, the trip to Miami progresses. These parallel narratives come together when Claude arrives at the house of his other daughter, Alice, and is told by Alice’s former husband that she had been killed in an accident years before (information of which the audience is aware from the parallel narrative). At that moment, Alice’s house becomes, much like the spatial delusions in *The Father*, a nursing home, the place dreaded so much it had to be denied through a fictitious story. Florida:

becomes this mythical place where you are protected, where nothing can reach you anymore. It is the place of appeasement, where everything that does violence to you in life stops hurting you. Basically, Florida is a bit like a movie theatre, a screen-box where you can dream, where those you love are forever with you (Baronnet 2021).

The fantastic story of the invented trip to Florida is delivered with a comic sub-stratum, where the twinkle is shared by the storyteller himself. While not completely unaware of his deeply troubling condition, he metamorphoses it through an inventive, consoling imagination. The use of flashbacks is a common practice in cultural depictions of declining abilities to comprehend the world and conduct self-care. Flashbacks are commonly used to dramatize loss and decline. A particularly relevant example is the South Korean thriller film *Memoir of a Murderer* (Won et al. 2017), whose narrative replicates the memory deterioration of a person living with dementia using the iconography of flashbacks, circularity, repetition of events, white and black screens, and abrupt cuts to parallel symptoms of the disease (Medina 2022). A few minor flashback scenes in *Floride* notwithstanding, Zeller and Hampton avoid them deliberately,



using more sophisticated means of time and place transitions. Both go for the very moment for which a flashback would have been a digression. The only time that matters for the perfect recreation of the experience of dementia is, for them, the abject disgrace of the moment.

## Conclusion

Playfulness is the balancing act offered by *Floride* against the gravity of dementia. In an interview, Zeller maintained that director Phillip Le Guay changed his play beyond recognition (Beasley 2021). The fact, however, is that *Floride* retains the substance of the play it is based on, in terms of narrative, thematic materials, major characters, and dramatic conflicts, making it immediately recognizable, but with an open interpretation in mood and tone.

*Floride* avoids the trap of a sentimental eulogy for a lost self, introducing a man who is obviously not well but very much alive. The ubiquitous emotional response of relatives, often replicated by people with dementia themselves, that of longing becomes somewhat irrelevant, if not straight out degrading when identity is not severed but prolonged, even when altered, which is the case with Claude. Le Guay and his cast, Rochefort and Kiberlain as the leading characters, portray and treat the protagonist/person with dementia as a complex social being and, above all, contribute to a perception of dementia as a valid, even if demanding, way of being in the world, validating imagination, even when unruly and maladaptive, and a genuine sense of respect for what it means to be a person with dementia in all its various manifestations, keeping an overall sense of doubt in the face of uncertainties. This perception of dementia resonates with Arno Geiger's (2017) attempt to portray dementia in the memoir *The Old King in His Exile*. Geiger documents his father's progress into Alzheimer's disease by "foregrounding his unchanged personhood, gendered self, and embodied, relational subjectivity" (Scharge-Früh 2022: 146).

The humanistic message of *Floride* echoes critical re-interpretations of late style and creativity in artists with dementia (Marcus et al. 2009; Wright 2022). Picasso's "problematic" last works were initially dismissed as senile scrawls before being celebrated as bold experiments (Brown 2018). Dementia as a disease category is incredibly idiosyncratic in manifestation and rarely runs a smooth course of manageable

decline (Kitwood 1998). Capacities can wax and wane; sudden losses are frequently observed while varying degrees of “rementia” (temporary regaining of abilities) are also quite common. A powerful illustration of such a “rementia” text that reverses typical biomedical and socio-cultural narratives related to Alzheimer’s disease is Walrath’s (2016) graphic memoir, *Aliceheimer’s*, whose underlying notion is that people living with dementia are individuals who have entered into “wonderlands of their own creation” (Venkatesan & Kasthuri 2018: 80). Rementia is a process requiring a cautiously negotiated “structuring and de-structuring” of the self and its changing relation to the world (Golander & Raz 1996: 271). Claude’s inventive playfulness and its validation by those around him resonates with the recent growing interest in person-centered, “living well” approaches to dementia, often taking the form of efforts to engage people living with dementia in a range of creative, socially inclusive activities that help to affirm personhood and redress the biomedical focus on loss and deficit. However, by emphasizing more traditional forms of creativity “interventions,” more personal and idiosyncratic forms of creativity that emerge in everyday life have been overlooked, specifically with regard to how such creativity is used by people living with dementia and by their carers and family members as a way of negotiating changes in their everyday lives (Bellass et al. 2019).

In *Floride*, in place of flashbacks, we have the opposite, flash-forward: the imaginary trip to Miami is a projection of the inner screen of Claude’s mind onto the screen of the film, symbolically making the future a tangible psychological presence. This is provocatively implicit in one of the last shots in the film, where he looks out through the window of his new room and sees not the yard of an asylum but the tropical flora of Florida: “Dear me, they too have palm trees. I wouldn’t have believed ... [pause] ... Florida is indeed beautiful!”

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