

Film Review

THE VISITOR. 2008. WRITTEN AND
DIRECTED BY TOM MCCARTHY

Reviewed by Joyce King Heyraud

An emotionally intriguing and beautifully crafted indie film, *The Visitor* opens with 60-year-old Walter Vale (Richard Jenkins) attempting to orient himself in the emptiness of his suburban Connecticut home. His wife, who was a classical concert pianist, has died, leaving Walter bereft of his soul. He hammers mercilessly on her piano, unable to capture the music that has sunk into darkness. His ordered life as a professor of economics is tedious, and his home an airless shrine to the past. Although his demeanor is listless, his bumbling attempt to establish contact with the anima through the piano is touching and foreshadows the possibility of a new connection. Unable to find his bearings at home, Walter reluctantly agrees to deliver an uninspired paper on Third World development at New York University. The

city, a symbol for the Self, is the setting for Walter's foray out into the world. An unexpected spiritual awakening is prompted by the various manifestations of the archetype of the visitor.

Making a rare visit to his Manhattan apartment, Walter is puzzled to see a vase of flowers perched upon his coffee table, then shocked out of his torpor when he finds a woman in the bathtub. The apartment has been illegally sublet to a Syrian drummer named Tarek (Haaz Sleiman) and his Senegalese girlfriend Sainab (Denai Gurira), who sells handcrafted jewelry. Walter, out of compassion for the couple's homeless situation, allows them to stay, and because the Eros between them is infectious, he is slowly inducted into the stream of life.

Walter and Tarek gradually forge an unlikely friendship connected through unspoken mutual compassion. The nature of the bond between the two men begs the question of who is visiting whom. Despite Tarek's lack of a physical home, it is he who is most at home in the world and Walter who is the transient visitor.

In a strikingly poignant scene, Walter finds himself drawn to Tarek's drums. Alone in his apartment, dressed primly in his tweeds, he begins tentatively tapping, reflecting a nascent heartbeat of unfamiliar

energy. There is a beautiful enantiodromia; Walter, the professor, becomes Tarek's student. He learns that the African drumbeat is different from the classical rhythm that is so ingrained; its rhythm that quickens his pulse and inspires renewed curiosity.

Post 9/11 realities shatter the sense of growing intimacy between the three people when Tarek, discovered as an undocumented immigrant, is arrested and thrown into a detention center. The archetype of the visitor shifts shapes, as Walter becomes Tarek's lifeline through his faithful visits while becoming host to yet another visitor, Mouna (Hiam Abbas), Tarek's widowed mother. A restrained and tender relationship between Walter and Mouna is captured through a sensitively rendered embrace imbued with the quality of a *coniunctio*. Walter has integrated deeper, more related feminine energies with a stronger, more focused aspect of the masculine. Projecting enduring grace, Walter is dignified,

shy, and deeply selfless, and to Jenkins' credit, portrayed without a trace of sentimentality.

Because of the sociopolitical shadow of the illegal immigrant conundrum, Walter's surrogate multicultural family is torn apart as relationships that melded so beautifully on a personal level are impossible to sustain. Tarek is deported, torn from his girlfriend; and Mouna makes the decision to return to Senegal to join him. The separation is haunting, the emotional atmosphere saturated with unanswered questions and mysterious possibilities.

The audience is left with the image of Walter in a subway, a subterranean sphere, seated with his drum, a solitary figure listening intently to the beat of his own drummer.

Joyce King Heyraud, Ph.D., is a Jungian analyst in private practice in Pacific Palisades, CA and film editor of Psychological Perspectives.

Copyright of *Psychological Perspectives* is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.