

**Lansquenet from “tranquillité” to play.  
Based upon the film Chocolat by Lasse Hallström**

*Lara Giambalvo*

*Spring displays His ribbon blue  
fluttering through air's expanses,  
sweet aromas over fences  
touch with hope the lands anew.  
Violet still dreams,  
dreams of soon appearing.  
Hark! the sounds of distant harps, it seems!  
Yes, my Spring, it's You!  
You I have been hearing!  
(E. Mörike “It's Him!”)*

**Abstract**

New is amazing, it affects senses, like a cold winter wind striking one's face, like a red cloak standing out in the dullness of late winter night, like a good hot chocolate delighting even the most suspicious palate with its aroma, like exotic music attracting even the most insensible ears; new smells of spring and reawakening.

On arriving inside a group it upsets its existing balance, which in some cases has become stale and stinks of death. At first new generates suspicion or even open rebellion, however it can awaken both bodies and minds by stimulating play and creativity thus producing fresh vitality and other thoughts.

**Key words:** group, fusion/individuation, creativity

**Foreword**

This article is originally my final essay of the Group Psychotherapy class I attended at the Post graduate School of Psychotherapy.

The choice to keep the final reference to its origin meets my wish to describe how reading a film in a psychodynamic view point should not be considered as a mere exercise of style, but it will rather gain meaning inside its parent contest and can provide useful hints to investigate about the features of its setting – in this case the

specific stage my class group was going through at that time - obviously as I could see it.

### **Between fusion and individuation: awakening**

Lansquenet is a French village on the river Tannes. The people who live there are a group dominated by fusionality, who cannot tolerate difference. Those who dare distinguish themselves are either forced to flee – like the wife of the mayor Comte de Reynaud – or is pushed from social life, ignored and despised – like Armande, an insolent old woman who does not go to church and rejects the idea of living at the rest home; or crazy Josephine the bar-keeper's wife, who “waltzes at her own tune”. In this village people just have to “know their place in the scheme of things.”, keep to it and learn “not to demand more than that”. Anything new or unknown is immediately made normal, so that no one could be frightened. Comte de Reynaud is the guardian of the village order, he takes care to welcome strangers, he is a very pious man and helps the newly arrived parson by reviewing his weekly sermons with the purpose of supplying his community with a good teaching of the church dogma, and also to favour the proper integration of the new comer thus granting that the tradition left by the former parson could worthily continue so that nothing could be changed.

A few weeks before Easter, two unexpected strangers arrive at Lansquenet: Vianne and her daughter Anouk. Their arrival at the village is announced by a sly wind blowing in from the north, a cold restless wind that makes windows flap and throws doors open, a wind that nobody can stop. It is the wind of change: restless because it brings new life in a village overwhelmed by cramped calm, restless because when change takes place it causes anxiety and demands to drop one's certainty of something known in favour of something unknown that causes anxiety.

This anxiety is over self-loss, over fragmentation, this anxiety must be soothed. It is why Comte de Reynaud, upon learning about Vianne's arrival, goes to the cake-shop she has rented right in centre of the village and invites her to worship with the community at mass on Sunday and to keep to the village way of living.

But the new, Vianne, cannot be chained to what is already known and stirs up a scandal: she will not attend to the church service, and what is more she has a daughter and is unmarried. Unknown thus escapes the prearranged categories of knowledge, marks its boundaries while it opens to infinity (Levinas, 1961, mentioned in Corbella2003), to a surplus of unknowable that forms one of the main epistemological paradigms founding the group, that is supplementation.

When facing anxiety that could not be relieved by denying difference one has to intervene to defend order and assure the fusional group's survival: the community gets the assumption of fight flight and regards itself as the Truth keeper, it will demonize new, and the stranger will be the enemy to be fought and destroyed. This introduces to one of the most dangerous dynamics for the group life, that is the

scapegoat: unknown is the bearer of absolute evil, perdition and everlasting damnation; it must be excluded and persuaded to leave.

The threat grows further: not only by Vianne's upsetting presence: she has the sheer nerve to open a chocolaterie in the cake-shop she rented beside the church and, worse, just in time for Lent thus utterly mocking Reynaud, but more shocking figures appear on the scene. The Gypsies "the river rats" dock their house boats at the side of the river Tannes just opposite Lansquenet. Now the castle is engaged in the crusade against the chocolate maker and has to face a new campaign to boycott immorality :the Gypsies.

The fight seems to strike a hard shock to the possibility of a more integrated thought (Corbella, 2003), both sides are trapped inside the logic of omnipotence that preserves them from feeling lost and powerless when facing alterity, but on the other hand it prevents them from understanding how much alterity founds identity, moreover what they demonize in the others is that very part of unknown and beyond control that they cannot accept within themselves and obstinately project outside.

Reynaud and Vianne, for example, seem not to remember how inside their own personal history identity and alterity are bound together by an unbreakable tie, and both have forgotten short-living love stories where reason and passion, known and unknown appear to have met fruitfully anyway. The former was married to a sensual elegant lady, the latter is the fruit of romance between a well known apothecary and a beautiful wanderer. In the sharp contrast between male and female, where the former represents the law and the latter symbolizes feelings, he features culture and she personifies nature, a logic of opposites seems to be prevailed by the "aut aut", where the other as well as the self finds it difficult to be recognized in its complexity, and becomes a warren of projections. Thus it seems that we are dealing with a relationship with a subjective object which is not yet identified as an external reality with its own existence as described by Winnicot (1990): .

The turning point that can soften the fight by encouraging a switch from the logic of opposites to the logic of distinguished, i.e. from contraposition to co-presence, is supported by practicing the function of mirroring within the group. The opportunity to recognize in the other aspects of the self is aided by a revolving coloured plate that generates moving shapes. Vianne shows the plate to her customers and asks them to say what the shapes suggest; the answer will reveal their favourite chocolate and allows the chocolate maker to express a wish that was denied ever before. The stranger becomes the mirror of the others' needs that were long repressed to obey to the homologation to a confused, stiff and therefore external identity

Accepting that one can have individual needs implies that one has to face the others' needs, which are specific and different from one's own needs, just as one has one's favorite chocolate. This is the first movement of individuation after a time of fusionality that had acquired a deadly aspect. (Corbella, 2003).

The signs of death can then give way to new impulse of life: Luc, Armande's grandson does no longer draw only dead bodies, but sets working at his grandmother's portrait; Mme Audel gives up mourning her husband's death occurred

over thirty years before., and lets M Guillaume court her; Josephine makes up her mind to split up with her violent husband to begin a new life. Co-action to repeat can be overcome and time can wind again towards new fusions and new individuations.

## **Group transforming power and creative function**

Not only Vianne sets the inhabitants of Lansquenet free, but she gets rid of a ghost that she was carrying for a time too long: the destiny she inherited from generations of being a wanderer. A destiny that Anouk bears well in mind and shows through her imaginary friend, Pantoufle, a kangaroo who cannot hop because of his bad leg due to war injury. A kangaroo can be a good representation of the mother-daughter relationship with a difficulty to split to give space to a third person; thus Lansquenet is not the only one that fears the different, the change, but Vianne herself.

A sick Kangaroo that cannot hop is a kangaroo whose identity is denied, just like a relationship where fusionality prevents to recognize self from beyond-self. Like Vianne's mother had disregarded her daughter's needs and wishes, now Vianne risks to repeat the mistake as she wants to drag Anouk with her from one place to another in an endless escape from alterity, trying to convince herself that it was not only for the good of the girl, but it was her clear wish. Armande, Roux, the Gypsies' leader, and the other villagers will offer a mirroring function to Vianne causing her to retrieve her needs and fears she had projected onto her daughter going beyond confusion.

The group has not only the function of a mirror, but that of a container of contents that were unthinkable before: now it can receive shapeless and fragmented elements and return them with a meaning, like a chocolatier can make thousands different chocolates with enticing smell and taste starting from a blend of separate ingredients. This group function, described by Corrao (1981, quoted by Corbella, 2003) as  $\gamma$  function: the same function practiced by the mother on the mental contents of the baby and described by Bion (1962) as  $\alpha$  function. It has a healing effect on the ghosts of the past. In fact the re-elaboration of such ghosts made easier by the comparison with the inhabitants of Lansquenet helps Vianne to understand how much the transmission of a story that cannot find words to be told from one generation to the following one has weighted on her own existence. Everything occurs one morning at dawn while Vianne had decided to resume her journey: she was trying to reach the door of the chocolaterie, charged with packs and luggage, tugging by the arm her little daughter who refused to follow her. That's when the urn containing the ashes of Vianne's mother – that she always took with herself – fell on the ground and broke into pieces. The ashes are scattered all over the floor and everything seems to freeze still and silent, or maybe not: Vianne and Anouk hear noises and laughter coming from the kitchen, Josephine, Luc and his mother, M Guillaume and Mme Audel; they

are all busy lending a hand to prepare the celebration of fertility to take place on Easter Day, all excited about their role as apprentice chocolatiers.

Vianne no more needs fleeing, because she discovers that her own persecutor is not actually an external reality, Reynaud and those who came before and after him, but it is an inner reality. Thus the comparison with the group allows once again to recognize, beyond projected ghosts, a reality that cannot be cancelled and, claiming its existence becomes a reparative model of childhood and an emblem of a different opportunity to compare with others and think the change possible. This is the first step towards the transformation of partial objects into whole objects and therefore a starting contribution to the progress from pseudo object relationship to a more realistic object relationship, funding a creative interrelation with the other (Corbella, 2003).

This is the moment when the ghost of the past coming back, always the same, eventually undisguised, can be elaborated and changed into fantasy, from yoke into heritage and resort.

Now the ashes are no more a burden to carry along forever, they can rather be blown in the wind as the symbol of a free mind, that can exercise consciously and responsibly its right to recall and forget and seize motherly virtues - first of all the art of making chocolate - being capable of leaving behind and forgiving the faults and shortcomings of parental figures, this results in final emancipation – perhaps for the first time – from the logic of guilt, whether admitted or projected (Corbella, 2006a).

Comte de Reynaud follows a path running somewhat parallel to Vianne's, this too represents the construction of an objective object, or an external object, as we will see later.

This path, however, is bound to cross a difficult stage: the destruction of the object itself. In the film this stage can be represented by the two attempts to annihilating what is new: the first one against the Gypsies: their boats are set on fire by Josephine's husband Serge, urged by the hard sentence that Reynaud spoke toward the unwelcome guests. The second is performed by the Comte himself by stealing into the *chocolaterie* during nighttime with the purpose of destroying the chocolates prepared for the celebration of Fertility. The first attack causes the Gypsies' leave and the destruction, in the circuit of guilt, of the person who had set the offensive. The second attack has no outcome: the object survives the attempt of the subject to destroy it, because not only the change started out by Vianne's arrival has now involved many villagers of Lansquenet, who, as said before, have become promoters of the celebration and contributed to its arrangement, but even Reynaud is bound to recognize inside himself the awakening of the vital aspects he had always obliged himself to repress in the name of such a hard, almost sadistic super-egoic law.

Perhaps inside the village, the very destructive actions, symbols of a hopeless reaction to change and of a fit of rage toward a reality that cannot be powerfully bent to one's will, act as the starting point of the movement of individuation of the villagers. This movement is guaranteed by the strength of the group container, which, just like 'good-enough'-mothering, can not only survive the attack, but also avoid

reprisal. (Winnicott, 1971). If on the first attempt of destruction the group appears as a weak container falling to pieces: the Gypsies and then Serge, in the second case it holds, by fulfilling its functions and assuring Reynaud the opportunity of a reparative experience in his personal history. This positive event can be recalled as a precedent, or as a source of confidence in new offensive, just as in the therapeutic group the history of past success is itself a useful therapeutic factor in moments of utmost crisis. (Corbella, 2003)

Roux too represents the fear of change when he must leave the village, as he cannot deal with the distance from the other, a distance that shortens, arises old worries and opens to new risks thus offering the umpteenth evidence of how much the possibility that something will change is not less frightening of the certainty that everything will always be the same, but perhaps even more frightening (Corbella, 2003).

Roux re-approaching the group, in particular his love to Vianne, on one hand it is a new step in the progress to improve his capability to cope with ties, on the other it confirms also in the mother-child couple, Vianne-Anouk, the beginning of a movement of individuation based on the arrival of a third person and on overtaking the fusional couple to achieve recognition of the group. Even Pantoufle will thus finally recover from its injury and hop away towards new adventures. Anouk and Vianne strengthened by the experience of other possible ways to relate with each other will not miss it. This does not mean that, especially in times of crisis old ways of behaving will not be resumed, but it assures that, even in such case, the group can recall the accomplished progress (Corbella, 2003).

Speaking of changes and return to life, the name of the village sounds to me rather suggestive: Lansquenet i.e. *Landsknecht*, has two meanings: Landsknechts were German mercenary soldiers, but lansquenet is also the name of a gambling game. The concepts: servant, stranger and death-bearing seem to mark the change occurring in the village: from closed stifling place to a space where play and creativity may bring risk but can supply opportunities.

This change is made possible because identity meets alterity, known meets unknown; the new: Oedipus, whom the community had unsuccessfully tried to expel, upon meeting what is known awakens the preconscious area of the mind that seemed asleep. A transitional area that can separate and link in the meantime; the very area where dream, play and creativity originate (Corbella, 2006b).

Perhaps, it is thanks to the awakening of the preconscious area that the parson can preach the Easter sermon feeling free to express new thoughts without the influence of imposed scenario., pushed by a more realistic way of accepting responsibility and by an original way of thinking within the group.

The opportunity of sharing with the community the product of creativity re-awakened is also represented by the celebration taking place after Easter mass and finally rejoining the whole village in a joyful exchange of sweet, tasty food and new thoughts, symbol of the capacity to co-thinking within the group (Corbella, 2003). These colours, flavours and tastes which Vianne spread around the village, where life

had been made dull by tranquillité, did involve the whole community of Lansquenet by awakening their senses.

## Conclusions

To conclude I would like to go back to the beginning of my paper, that is my option on the subject to be dealt with: when the professor asked the class to analyze the group dynamics within a book or a film to our choice, I immediately thought about this film and about some of the themes I would like to highlight, however beginning to work turned out to be very difficult.

I wondered then if the apparent contradiction between the quick decision for the film and the slow start in writing the paper might be related to the stage our group was going through at that time: it seemed to me that the awakening movement reported in *Chocolat* was likewise going on; once the sense of belonging had strengthened one felt more free to express one's own differences, however this path to individuation was almost at embryonic stage and besides was showing difficult like any change towards what is unknown.

Just like in the film: characters were, all in all, just sketched out, they were not fully recognized in their complexity, but they were above all identified by their setting each one as the opposite of the other, where prevailing dichotomies seem irrevocable, first of all the difference of gender: projections and sharp contrapositions seemed to predominate in our group also at that time.

We were still living movements of individuation with some suspicion: the class was not prepared to tolerate excessive separation generating competition and conflict.

The film tells us, however, how giving up the image of a group where all members are equal and bear the challenge to recognizing oneself and the others as Persons (Lopez, 1994, quoted in Corbella, 2003), in other words as unique individuals inside a planned time, it can be a hard task, but it is a source of richness. If, on one hand it actually implies the need to accept the loss of confidence in something known and ratified, on the other it lets into better authenticity. So I wondered if the attack struck by Vianne to authority, especially to its more obsessive and controlling aspects and might recall the conflict dynamics occurring inside our group with regard to the features of the school institution that we considered as more stiff and standardizing and therefore as possible hindrance to our creativity.

The topics described above, first of all the competition inside the group and the conflict with authority, seemed to have acquired the trait of re-actualization of the adolescence stage of our group (Corbella, 2003), which equally appears in *Chocolat*.

Then the difficulty in writing a paper about the class might represent the effort of facing the risk to play the game individually inside the group, fearing to cause competition. This effort met the hope that genuine comparison might offer to all of us new opportunities of enrichment by sharing new thoughts (Corbella, 2003), just as it happens at Lansquenet during Ester celebration.

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**Lara Giambalvo**, Psychologist - Spazio Clinico Koinè Milano  
Postgraduate Scuola di Specializzazione in Psicoterapia Individuale e di Gruppo della C.O.I.R.A.G. (Confederazione di Organizzazioni Italiane per la Ricerca Analitica sui Gruppi).  
e-mail: [lara.giambalvo@gmail.com](mailto:lara.giambalvo@gmail.com)

Translated by Luisetta Colombo