CHAPTER FIVE

Michael Haneke and the Politics of Film Form

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'Insofar as truth is always obscene, I hope that all of my films have at least an element of obscenity.' (Haneke quoted in Sharrett 2004b)

Michael Haneke's films belong to a philosophical/theoretical/cinematic tradition that encompasses anti-systematic philosophy (Friedrich Nietzsche), sociological theories of modernity (Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer), the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industries (Theodor Adorno), and modernist European cinema.[1] Nietzsche dismissed systematic philosophers like G. W. F. Hegel and Immanuel Kant as 'philosophical labourers' whose main contribution consisted in *collecting* all past valuations and *abbreviating* them into formulas: 'It is the duty of these scholars to take everything that has hitherto happened and been valued, and make it clear, distinct, intelligible and manageable, to abbreviate everything long, even "time" itself, and to subdue the entire past' (1973: 142). In his critique of systematic/ dogmatic philosophy Nietzsche privileged the fragment, which, like existence itself, does not have a beginning or an end but begins or returns eternally: 'Existence begins in every instant; the ball There rolls around every Here. The middle is everywhere. The path of eternity is crooked' (1961: 234). The fragment was particularly suited to Nietzsche's genealogical project, whose purpose was to challenge the false belief in the eternal, essential nature of values and to demonstrate instead how and why particular values are constructed and privileged over others. Nietzsche's critique of

systematic philosophy's reliance on the 'collection' and 'abbreviation' of past valuations anticipated not only the emergence of a new understanding of philosophy as the invention of new concepts (Gilles Deleuze) but also a similar shift from representational literature, whose realism was predicated precisely on amassing an exhaustive amount of 'evidence', to modernist literature – influenced by, and in turn influencing, cinema – whose political potential lay, as Tom Conley has argued, in the privileging of visuality over narrativity. The increased awareness of the graphic or visual aspect of language in modernist (cinematic) literature meant that 'any word or sentence can be used to construct the meaning of any life whatsoever … [attesting] to an ultimate and ubiquitous democratisation [and, we might add, globalisation] of experience' (Conley 2008: 141).

Nietzsche's philosophy of the fragment, his dismissal of totalising, exhaustive, evidentiary accounts of reality, along with modernist literature's emphasis on the graphic aspect of language – an emphasis on the rootlessness or groundlessness of the signifier, on its democratisation and deterritorialisation – reverberate in contemporary cinema's tendency to privilege visuality over narrativity and multiple, intersecting, fragmentary narratives over singular, linear ones. This is not surprising after all: with the idea of a closed, homogeneous society becoming increasingly untenable, the classical film narrative has proven equally obsolete. Fragmentary narratives register more truthfully the complexities of life in the age of globalisation, drawing connections between seemingly disparate phenomena while, at the same time, exploring local resistances to the homogenising forces of globalisation, which often threaten to obscure social, cultural and national differences.

Structured around the principles of fragmentation, indeterminacy, chance and multiplicity, Haneke's aesthetics reveals his indebtedness to theories of modernity, especially those of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin. The core principle of Simmel's sociological criticism, on which Kracauer would model his own investigations of cultural ephemera, and which anticipated the transformations in narrative structure brought about by globalisation – most visible in migrant and diasporic cinema, cross-border films and hyperlink films – was the belief that all 'expressions of spiritual/intellectual life are interrelated in countless ways. No single one can be extricated from this web of relations, since each is enmeshed in the web with all other such expressions' (Kracauer 1995: 232). Kracauer's explorations, like Simmel's, were guided by the search for relationships of analogy or essential congruence between the most disparate phenomena. Haneke's emphasis on the social, ethical and political significance of the trivial, the accidental and the everyday, along with his predilection for fragmented and digressive narratives, revives Kracauer's fascination with the ephemeral, the habitual and the banal. Although Haneke's films belong to the moment of globalisation, not to the moment of modernity, the principles of fragmentation, indeterminacy, multiplicity and fortuitousness have not lost their significance, regardless of whether they are posited as basic affinities of the film medium (Kracauer) or as characteristics of an increasingly transnational, deterritorialised, fragmented, global reality (Haneke). The basic affinities of film for 'the fortuitous', 'the indeterminate', 'the flow of life' and 'endlessness' are no longer elements of an ontological *theory of film* but aspects

of a concrete *historical reality* shaped by the forces of globalisation. In other words, Kracauer's recommendation that the impression of 'endlessness', for instance, can be suggested by recording a plethora of sense data with no consideration for how it all fits together narratively, is no longer a *stylistic point* (how best to achieve the impression of endlessness or indeterminacy in cinema) but a *description of an objectively existing reality* composed of elements the relationships between which are continually shifting, deferred or occluded.

Haneke views film as an alternative public sphere with a demythologising and democratising potential which he – following Nietzsche, Kracauer, Benjamin and Adorno – locates in the fragment. Benjamin's critique of systematic explorations of culture and his preference for montage and collage eventually led him to abandon the conventional book form in favour of the essay:

> incomplete, digressive, without proof or conclusion, in which could be juxtaposed fragments, minute details ('close-ups') drawn from every level of the contemporary world … The style of the essay was to be an 'art of interruption' … Benjamin's procedure was 'to collect and reproduce in quotation the contradictions of the present without resolution' … This collage strategy was itself an image of the 'break-up', the 'disintegration' of civilisation in the modern world, relevant to one of Benjamin's most famous formulas: 'Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things' (*Tragic Drama* 178), the premise being that something becomes an object of knowledge only as it 'decays' or is made to disintegrate. (Ulmer 1983: 97)

Fragmentation foregrounds the loss of coherent meaning but, at the same time, it has an emancipating potential since, as Kracauer asserts in *Theory of Film*, 'only once the current state of things is revealed as provisional [that is, incomplete, fragmented] can the question of their proper order arise' (1978: 22). Narrative fragmentation, which, according to Kracauer, conveys a sense of the endlessness and indeterminacy of reality, is central to Haneke's conception of film form. By fragmenting the narrative – for instance, consistently leaving out the beginnings and endings of scenes, or using 'cut cuts', which draw attention to the audiovisual *découpage* – Haneke demands that we stay alert and react spontaneously – emotionally, rather than intellectually – to the events represented on the screen. Challenging the idea of the art work as internally coherent, unified and self-sufficient, and the false notion of 'Truth' derived from this idea, Haneke insists that only fragments can reveal momentarily, perhaps even unintentionally, something truthful without ever revealing 'the Truth'.[2]

Haneke's belief in the emancipating potential of an aesthetic of fragmentation, dissonance and displeasure places him, as well, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture. For Adorno the fragment was the last vestige of truthfulness in a mass society ruled by the culture industries: 'The highest products of art are caught up in fragmentariness, which is their way of confessing that even they do not have what the immanence of their form claims they have … The enigma of art works is the fact of their having been broken off. If transcendence were really present in them,

they would be mysteries rather than riddles. They are not. They are riddles precisely because they are fragments disclaiming to be wholes, even though wholes is what they really want to be' (1984: 133, 184). Adorno insisted that aesthetic experience ought to overcome the attitude of tasting and savouring, for in a false world all pleasure is false, including aesthetic pleasure. However, rather than encouraging art to simply negate this false world, Adorno foregrounded the critical and demythologising potential of mimesis. The modernity of art, he maintained, lies in its mimetic relation to a petrified and alienated reality, not in the direct negation of that reality, which would produce merely a 'jargon of authenticity'.[3]

While Haneke's films are a product of the historical moment in which he works – the 'moment' of globalisation – they also belong to a European tradition of modernist filmmaking that includes directors such as Robert Bresson, Michaelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky.[4] In the interviews included on the DVD releases of *The Seventh Continent* and *Hidden*, Haneke acknowledges his interest in characters whose motives cannot be explained, and in situations or conflicts that cannot be resolved. He professes no interest in exploring causes and reasons and instead focuses on consequences and effects, on that which is readily observable, the inconspicuous surface-expressions of the age. The majority of critics attribute the 'lack of emotion' in Haneke's films to his preoccupation with form and structure, rather than with psychological analysis. The general agreement seems to be that Haneke's 'beautifully controlled' films force viewers to *think* (and generally to 'feel bad') but rarely *move* them. However, I would argue that Haneke's 'cold' films produce a far more intense sort of viewer identification than most mainstream films. Providing the viewer with the reasons and motivations of a character increases the distance between the viewer and the character: the viewer understands the character objectively. Conversely, the less we know about a character's psychology, the stronger our identification with him as we strive to 'fill in' the frustrating psychological gap we sense by projecting onto the character our own desires, fears and frustrations.[5] Paradoxically, it is precisely by withholding the psychological analysis of characters (showing the effects but not the causes of their actions), and by fragmenting the narrative – both modernist techniques of *distanciation* – that Haneke intensifies viewer identification. It is harder for us to become emotionally invested in a full-blown, self-sufficient story than in fragments of a story: we cannot integrate the complete story into our psychic life; we cannot experience it as something happening to us. The complete story, like the motivated character, appears frozen, objectified – both appeal to our understanding and to our judgement rather than to our emotions.

Although Haneke's fragmentary, minimalist aesthetics seems to embody a quintessentially postmodern affectlessness or moral indifference – for instance, the fragmentary narratives of *The Seventh Continent*, *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* (*71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, 1994) and *Code inconnu: Récit incomplet de divers voyages* (*Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys*, 2000) do not distinguish between significant and insignificant events and do not analyse characters' desires or motives, as if to suggest that these are inherently unknowable – Haneke does not brush aside the problem of guilt and moral responsibility. Precisely by treating any-moment-whatever or any-action-whatever as a potential catalyst for a dramatic, irreversible

sequence of events, Haneke creates the impression that all events are always already over-determined, that is, destined. Both *The Seventh Continent* and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* are based on true stories involving what appear to be unmotivated suicide and murder, although unmotivated does not necessarily mean unpremeditated. How does one explain the meticulously premeditated yet unmotivated suicide in *The Seventh Continent*, or the chronologically escalating network of chance events that lead up to, without necessarily 'causing', the senseless mass murder at the end of *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*? Although Haneke denies that we can pinpoint the exact causes that led a perfectly normal middle-class Austrian family to commit suicide, or an average looking student to shoot a dozen strangers in a Viennese bank, the disciplined obsession with which he amasses the unnoticeable details that make up our daily lives, down to the most banal gesture, the most offhand comment, the most insignificant action – putting on one's socks in the morning, washing the car, or trying to arrange, in less than sixty seconds, a few pieces of paper in the shape of a cross – or the most automated action (children jumping over a pommel horse in physical education class, in *The Seventh Continent*, or Max playing an interminable game against a table tennis robot in *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*) – suggests *not* that each of these details might have been 'the' clue, the piece of the puzzle that can finally demystify the reasons for the gruesome line of events to follow, but rather that there are aspects of our existence so inexplicably banal and over-familiar that they inexorably dictate the course of our life in an almost magical way. As we watch Haneke's films, we have the uncanny feeling that the events we see are absolutely accidental, unmotivated and senseless but at the same time – or precisely *because* of that – inevitable.

The Seventh Continent is divided into three parts, 1987, 1988 and 1989. Since 1989 is the fatal year in which the family commits suicide, we naturally look for possible reasons amidst the fragments of the family's life we see in the two years preceding the suicide. However, Haneke does not give us anything to 'work with'. The only traumatic event that could potentially serve as an explanation – the death of Anna's mother – is a red herring: the death takes its toll on Anna's brother, who sinks into depression as a result of it, but Anna herself appears unaffected. It is not her own mother's death but the accidental death of a couple of strangers in a car accident on a rainy night, as Anna and Georg are driving back from a visit to Georg's parents, that brings Anna to tears as she becomes suddenly and violently aware of the sheer insupportability of existence. Throughout the film Haneke's narrative economy repeatedly clashes with the unabashedly transparent symbolism of certain scenes. As Anna and Georg leave the car wash in the first scene of the film, the camera focuses on a poster advertising Australia as a tourist destination. The car wash scene is repeated again later in the film – right after the family drives past the car accident – and so are the travel poster (which gradually comes to signify 'death' rather than 'vacation'), the trip to the supermarket, the family's morning routine (Haneke foregrounds the sheer automatism of these routine actions by 'inverting' the classical *plan américain* and showing us only the lower part of the characters' bodies rather than their faces), and the television news coverage: these trivial events become suffused with symbolism simply by virtue of being repeated. The most striking instance of this transparent symbolism is the motif

of obstructed vision developed through the car wash scenes, Eva's imaginary blindness, Anna's professional career (optometry), and the story one of her customers tells of a girl casting a spell on her classmates for making fun of her glasses.[6]

For all its formal inventiveness *The Seventh Continent* presents the meaninglessness of middle-class existence simply as a fact rather than a problem: Georg and Anna decide to commit suicide because they cannot find a good enough reason not to. In a letter to his parents Georg writes: 'I believe if one looks at the life one has lived straight in the eye, it's easy to accept the notion of the end … This is not a critique, but a statement of fact.'[7] *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, on the other hand, suggests that existence does not consist of 'basic facts' but of choices actively pursued or rejected, that not choosing is also a choice.[8] In one scene a friend explains to Max that one cannot 'not bet' on God's existence, because not betting presupposes that one does not believe in God: one cannot simply claim indifference for indifference, too, is a moral and political choice. Thus, while in *The Seventh Continent* Haneke explores an abstract existential crisis unfolding in an isolated, private drama, in *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* he is more interested in the larger – social, political and media – context within which events take place. Throughout the film Haneke cuts violently – in the middle of a line of dialogue or in the middle of an action – from one narrative strand to another; however, the abrupt cutting points up the interconnection of events and characters rather than their isolation or independence from one another. Although Max's particular motive for going on a killing rampage is left as unclear as that of the family in *The Seventh Continent*, placing his story in the context of other similar stories drives home the point that the general deterioration of human (specifically parent-children) relationships – the old man and his estranged daughter, the married couple driven apart by their shared sense of powerlessness in the face of their baby's sickness, the orphaned Romanian boy who crosses illegally into Austria because someone told him 'in Austria they treat children well', the alienated orphaned girl and the Austrian family trying to adopt her – lies at the heart of Max's impulsive, senseless crime.

Insofar as it explores the subjects of alienation and globalisation in a deliberately fragmented, multiple narrative, *Code Unknown* could be seen as a sequel to *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*. The film opens with a characteristically Hanekean juxtaposition of art cinema elements – whose effect we expect to be obfuscation rather than clarification – with an unabashedly transparent aesthetic of coding/decoding. Although on one level the opening – a variation on charades in which a group of deaf children try to guess what kind of emotion one of them is 'acting out' – can be easily seen as a piece from art cinema's 'distanciation techniques kit', on another level it functions as a straightforward summary of the film's 'theme' already announced in its title, 'Code Unknown'. In fact, the deaf children's various interpretations of the girl's behaviour read like a synopsis of recurrent themes in Haneke's oeuvre: loneliness, alienation, failure to communicate, bad conscience and entrapment. Although the girl dismisses all of these interpretations as incorrect, the film eventually makes it clear that the 'correct' interpretation is not one of these but all of the above. Paradoxically, then, the opening *stages* – in the literal sense of the word – *the absence of a code*, but it does so in such a straightforward, transparent, almost allegorical way, that we immediately *decode*

the meaning of the sequence. The effect of 'book-ending' the film with an explicit reiteration of the film's 'theme – Haneke repeats this sequence, though with a different child, at the end of the film – is to conflate distance (art cinema's distanciation) with proximity (mainstream cinema's immediacy and narrative transparency).

Among the most readily observable effects of the dialectic of globalisation/expansion/dispersal/inclusion, on the one hand, and localisation/contraction/collapse/exclusion, on the other hand, is the increased significance of the accidental, the random and the potential.[9] Haneke's films reflect the 'intensification' or 'potentialisation' of time and space brought about by globalisation, an acute awareness that every 'moment' and every 'place' are potential sites of conflict with an indeterminate number of potential ramifications. In *Code Unknown* a teenager's trivial, thoughtless gesture – Jean throws his croissant wrapper in Maria's lap thereby provoking Amadou's indignation – sets in motion a series of random encounters between strangers that dramatise a range of personal, social, class, racial and ethical conflicts. Haneke's interest in any-moment-whatever and any-place-whatever, to use Deleuze's terminology, in arbitrary moments and accidental encounters, is not only aesthetic but ultimately ethical and political. His films do not gravitate towards metaphysical reflections on destiny, fate and coincidence; instead, they explore the indefinite potential for conflict that each moment holds within itself. The fragmentary structure of Haneke's films does not, however, merely dramatise or enact the failure of communication that often constitutes the films' subject matter.[10] Such a reading would cast Haneke in the role of a romantic pessimist who longs for an ideal community he knows perfectly well is unattainable. On the contrary, the fragmentary structure of his films undermines the utopian idea of a community premised on a vague notion of the 'common'; in this respect, his films should be read in the context of recent theoretical debates on the idea of a 'European identity', specifically Étienne Balibar's attempt to conceive a 'community without community' and his call to 'deterritorialise' citizenship, to establish a 'citizenship in Europe' (based on human and civil rights) rather than a 'European citizenship' (based on nationality and ethnicity) (2003: page numbers if these are direct quotes]. In a 'community without community' the principles of democracy are tested on a daily basis rather than taken for granted. From this point of view, the conflicts Haneke's characters struggle with should be seen not as 'proof' of the failure of the conventional idea of 'community', based on the principles of belonging and exclusion, but as absolutely essential to the establishment of a democratic order precisely by virtue of contesting these principles on a daily basis, transforming them from abstract principles into immediate, everyday problems that demand an immediate individual response.

The structure of *Code Unknown* dramatises the dialectic between the global and the local: the story unfolds by means of dispersal and expansion, bringing together characters from diverse racial, social and national backgrounds but refraining from privileging a single, regulating point of view. Like all of Haneke's films *Code Unknown* explores the victim/victimiser dialectic that was also a major concern of *enfant terrible* of New German Cinema, Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Both Haneke and Fassbinder (in films such as *Katzelmacher* (1969), *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, 1972) and *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Fear Eats the Soul*, 1974))

reject the simplistic, binary view of oppression that automatically assigns the blame to empowered characters thereby ruling out any chance for subjective agency among the disempowered. In *Code Unknown* everyone is both guilty and wronged. For instance, while the likable and fragile Anne easily wins our sympathy, it is not entirely clear that she is free of racial biases. While riding the Métro Anne is accosted by two Arab teenagers who accuse her of being a beautiful, arrogant woman who does not want to mix with commoners, let alone Arabs like them. As in an earlier scene, in which Anne hears her next-door neighbours abusing their daughter but does not interfere (although she is visibly disturbed by it), she once again fails to act and simply moves to another seat, though we cannot tell if she is really guilty of the arrogance the two Arabs attribute to her or if she is merely trying to avoid any complications (a 'defensive' attitude that could be seen as racist in itself). Conversely, the scene can be read as an instance of reverse racism, with the two Arabs assuming that Anne is a racist simply *because* she is white.

Haneke seeks to expose and condemn the principles of exclusion underlying various forms of oppression and victimisation without however automatically blaming those occupying privileged positions of power and supposedly most likely to perpetuate established strategies of exclusion; instead, he reminds us that the principles of exclusion and marginalisation are universal, that they exist among both the powerful and the disenfranchised. Two scenes draw attention to the fact that marginalisation or the failure of communication happen not only in the space separating the 'centre' from the 'margins' but *within the margins* as well. The opening scene, as we saw, features a group of deaf children, whose 'deafness' is usually constructed as 'marginal' from the perspective of those with a functioning sense of hearing. However, as the scene makes painfully clear, even those who are supposed to possess the specific 'technical competence' required for decoding the messages of other members of their 'community' (the 'community of the deaf') prove incapable of decoding the messages they receive. Later in the film, the French authorities establish Maria's illegal status – Maria managed to 'smuggle' herself on a German truck, along with other East Europeans, into France – and extradite her back to her native Romania. One night, surrounded by family and friends, she breaks down in front of a friend and confesses that while she was still in Paris she once gave money to a gypsy beggar, but when she saw how dirty he was she ran to wash her hands. She then recalls another, painfully similar situation when a well-dressed French man on St. Germain threw money in her lap, as disgusted with her as she had been with the gypsy beggar. In the space of a few lines of dialogue, Haneke shifts gears, transporting the viewer from the level of the personal to the level of the national and the transnational: in relation to West Europeans, Maria suddenly realises, East Europeans occupy the same subservient position that gypsies occupy in relation not only to the 'community' of Europeans (both West and East Europeans) but, more generally, to the 'community of humanity' from which they are excluded.

Although one cannot doubt the sincerity of Haneke's critique of the practices of exclusion and marginalisation in Europe, *Code Unknown* is not entirely free of the West European's stereotypical image of Eastern Europe. When Maria is extradited back to Romania, we see her dancing with her family and neighbours at her daughter's

wedding: the scene reproduces the stereotypical image of the Balkans as a predominantly agrarian, pre-modern part of Europe.[11] During a dinner conversation with friends Georges repeats another familiar stereotype concerning the difference between life in the West and in the East: in the Balkans life is simple, he says, since people worry only about their survival; it is here, in the West, that we complicate life needlessly, torturing ourselves with moral questions. It is not surprising that West Europeans are the most complex characters in *Code Unknown*, whereas the 'complexity' of Maria's character is derived entirely from the double life she leads: an illegal worker in France, a mother and wife in Romania. Although Haneke appeals to our sympathy and understanding by presenting 'both sides of her story', it is significant that he never puts Maria in a situation where she has to make a difficult moral choice for example. On the other hand, what makes Anne's character complex and, ultimately, more interesting and believable, is her personal struggle with moral issues, such as trying to determine the limits of her moral responsibility (whether or not she should do something about her neighbours' abuse of their daughter).

Haneke is committed to presenting local injustices and inequalities as particular manifestations of universal problems that transcend national borders. The opposite, however, is equally true: history on a grand scale (the war in Kosovo) is just an extension, or a more visible version, of small, everyday conflicts, which demand an equally urgent response. Thus, the philosophical discussion of the ethics of media coverage of the war in Kosovo ('Do I need to see starving children in order to know what hunger is?') is inseparable from everyday, concrete situations that appeal to our moral and civil duty (Anne's knowledge of her neighbours' abusive behaviour and her failure to intervene). While transnational political problems are treated on the same level as smaller, domestic problems of miscommunication and racism, characters move abruptly from highly-charged dialogue – 'Have you ever made someone happy?' Anne asks Georges in the supermarket – to something as banal as 'Didn't you want rice?' The parallel Haneke draws between two sets of photographs Georges takes (both represented by means of montage sequences) further underscores the interdependence of 'History' and 'histories'. The first sequence of photographs we see consists of images Georges has taken in Kosovo. The second one appears towards the end of the film and consists of snapshots of people riding the Paris Métro (Georges takes these photographs secretly). The second montage sequence is accompanied by Georges' voice-over as he reminisces about his experience in Kosovo rather than commenting on the photographs we see. He recalls a time when he was mistakenly taken hostage. His original Taliban guard was eventually replaced by an American guard, who, in answer to all of Georges' questions, would ask him again and again: 'What can I do for you?' This question, repeated several times over the blank faces of Métro passengers, implicates them visually and morally in the Kosovo atrocities, regardless of their actual knowledge of, or participation in, them.

Rather than viewing ethics as an abstract philosophical question, Haneke assigns moral responsibility to everyone. No one is guilt-free. During the above-mentioned montage sequence Georges reflects: 'It's easy to talk about "the ecology of the image" and "the value of the non-transmitted image". But what really matters are the end

results.' The media are bound to present a skewed image of other people's suffering, and often use it to bolster up their own image as a vehicle of democracy. However, defending the 'ecology' of the image, insisting on its undecipherability – on the absence or unknowability of a code – can be just as easily exploited as a justification for moral and political apathy. To question, as Francine does, the ethics of media coverage of human suffering in Kosovo might be necessary, but to claim that media coverage does not tell us – or cannot tell us – anything about what is going on in Kosovo, that the media only mediates a reality that continually recedes from us, is to wash our hands of this reality and perhaps even to justify forgetting it. Haneke continually walks the line between refusing to interpret images for us and foregrounding their undecodability while, at the same time, remaining aware of the political risks inherent in this insistence on the lack of a code. Even as he refuses to interpret events and characters explicitly – on the level of 'story', for example – he insists on the importance of interpretation on the level of form and structure. Indeed, in an interview included on the DVD release of *The Seventh Continent* he argues that since all stories have already been told, the only way a film can convey meaning, tone or attitude is through its form and structure.[12] Thus, the 'code' in the film's title refers to two different codes: the code of social communication, which Haneke sees as broken, and, on the other hand, the cinematic code which offers greater hopes of being decoded, possibly breaking the code to social communication as well.

Haneke is often compared to Alfred Hitchcock: the DVD release of *Hidden*, for instance, features the following critical praise, 'Like Hitchcock, only creepier' (Rea 2006). The comparison is usually justified in terms of genre: Hitchcock is, of course, known as the master of the thriller, while Haneke is often praised for his revision (critique) of the genre, particularly in *Funny Games*, *Benny's Video* (1992) and *Hidden*, all of which can be described as 'thrilling' in a kind of chilling rather than suspenseful and playful (Hitchcockian) way. Hitchcock's films often explore the interpenetration of reality and fantasy, the real and the imaginary;[13] however, whereas Hitchcock tends to emphasise the playful or ironic implications of the conflation of the two realms, Haneke tends towards the serious and the moralistic, engaging in 'games' rather than in 'play'. His films are often structured like Hitchcock's, with fantasy and reality feeding into each other in a sort of infinite loop. Nevertheless, rather than problematising the relationship between reality and fantasy *within* the film diegesis, as Hitchcock does, Haneke, who is much more interested in the media's social and political role, in the film as a medium rather than as a means for telling stories, prefers to disturb the distinction between the diegetic and the non-diegetic. In *Code Unknown*, *Hidden* and *Funny Games* he underscores the ambiguity of the image by continually undermining the viewer's assumed distance or proximity to it: in *Code Unknown* certain scenes are revealed to be part of the film-within-the-film, in which Anne stars; in *Hidden* particular scenes are shown to be pre-recorded on a tape the film's protagonists are watching. Like Jean-Luc Godard, who often provides a commentary on the film-within-the-film (in *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), Michel tells Patricia a story about a gangster and his faithful girlfriend, which foreshadows Patricia's eventual betrayal), Haneke plays

with the diegetic/non-diegetic distinction as a way of addressing the audience or even suggesting how he wants us to respond to the film we are watching.

For instance, at one point in *Code Unknown* we see Anne rehearsing a scene for a thriller in which she plays an upper-middle-class woman looking for a new house (following an incident in which her son almost falls from a high-rise apartment). She is shown into a large house whose major selling point is its insulation/isolation: it is fenced in with bushes and shrubs and the windows in the music room have been walled up so that the 'noise' of the outside world does not penetrate it. As Anne prepares for the first take she exchanges a few words with the film director who remains offscreen. Anne addresses him, looking straight into the camera, and in that moment the camera acquires a ghostly, double existence, both shooting the film *Code Unknown* and shooting the thriller within the film. The director offscreen tells Anne she is locked in the room and will die there. She begins to cry, pleading with the invisible director, who tells her that the only reason she is there is because she fell into his trap, not because he wants anything from her; in fact, he admits, he quite likes her. The scene is clearly meant to dramatise, and thus make us aware of, our own vulnerability and acquiescence to the shocking, violent images typical of thrillers, but also, increasingly, of other Hollywood genre films as well. Yet, even as the scene forces us into an awareness of our unforgivable passivity as film viewers, it also spells out what our engagement with a film ought to be: 'Show me your true face; react spontaneously to what you see.' This scene (along with others) exemplifies the sense of 'game' or 'hyper-play' peculiar to Haneke, who consistently manages to drain any lightheartedness we might have associated with 'playfulness' and to infuse it instead with unmistakable gravity. We are left to wonder whether what we see is an actress delivering a convincing performance of her role in a thriller, an actress on whom the director within the film is playing a nasty practical joke, or a woman threatened by a psychopath. The game Haneke plays has nothing to do with the hyperself-conscious, self-referential tricks of postmodernists like Quentin Tarantino;[14] it is a calculated game of strategy challenging our implicit assumptions about the immediacy and transparency of the image.

While in some scenes in the film – scenes coded as 'real' within the film diegesis – characters act inconsistently or do not act at all, making it difficult to attribute to them a specific motivation, other scenes, like the one just cited, blur the distinction between acting and not acting. As a result, the emotions expressed during a scene when a character is supposed to be acting (as we discover after the scene is over) often appear as exaggerated versions of the emotions that remain unspoken in the 'real scenes' where Haneke's cold formalism reigns supreme. For instance, Anne's anxiety over her relationship with Georges, who seems incapable of intimacy, is expressed in, or displaced onto, the scenes in which she is acting. In one scene she performs a monologue from *Romeo and Juliet* and in the middle of it breaks into hysterical laughter. It remains unclear, however, whether the scene expresses in an exaggerated, theatricalised manner what remains unsaid in her real romantic life, whether the hysteria is part of the performance, or a displaced expression of her real feelings for Georges. In another scene she cannot stop laughing at the sequence she is supposed to dub until the director asks her if it is too difficult to say 'I love you' to the actor dubbing the male character in the

film. In a scene to which I have already referred a few times, Anne overhears her neighbours abusing their daughter and later receives an anonymous note (we do not know if the note is real or if it is some kind of prank) in which the girl asks Anne for help. Anne does nothing about it and blames Georges for not wanting to help her make a decision. Her failure to make a decision – that is, her decision to ignore the note – is displaced onto a scene in the thriller she is shooting. In that scene we see her swimming in the pool with her husband, while their son starts climbing over the balcony railing; he almost falls off the balcony but his father manages to get to him in time. Anne's character is in shock: she slaps her son and falls into her husband's arms crying, pleading with him that they move out of the apartment. She completely forgets about the child who walks away from the couple, once again unprotected. The scene functions as a sort of displaced call of conscience, the return of repressed feelings of guilt over Anne's failure to react spontaneously to the cry for help she receives 'offstage'.

The motif of responding to a missive whose author remains anonymous or inconclusively established is repeated in *Hidden* whose middle-class protagonists receive anonymous recordings of their own home which has apparently been under surveillance. In both cases, the author of the warning (the note, the tape) is not identified even though we are given some likely possibilities (the neighbours' daughter, Majid or Majid's son). These missives function as a call of conscience, of which the characters are painfully aware but nevertheless fail to answer. The problem these messages raise is summarised by Anne in the supermarket scene in *Code Unknown*. Frustrated with Georges' unwillingness to help her decide what to do about the note, Anne asks him how he would react if she told him she were pregnant. Georges wants to know if she is joking or serious but Anne demands that he must decide whether he can trust her or not just as he had advised her to decide whether she should believe the note or dismiss it as a prank. *Hidden* rests on the same hypothetical situation: is Majid trying to get revenge on Georges, which is why he sent him the tapes, or is Georges' guilt independent of the identity and motivation of the author of the tapes? How does one hear the call of conscience? Does one wait for the wronged party to claim retribution? As Jean-François Lyotard asks in *The Differend* (1989), how can one be the addressee of a question whose answer depends on one's very ability to be the addressee of the question?

The repression of guilt and the moral and social consequences of living in 'bad faith' (Jean-Paul Sartre) are recurring themes in Haneke's films. However, on more than one occasion, Haneke has professed his reluctance to limiting the interpretation of his films to a particular historical period, nation or political problem. In an interview included on the *Hidden* DVD, he emphasises the fact that although the film is set in France and makes specific references to the Algerian War and the 1961 FLN (Front de Libération Nationale/National Liberation Front) revolt, the events in the film could take place in any country. He does not seek to represent or comment on a particular political problem but rather to draw attention to the inevitably political nature of the personal. Although the film does not try to suggest a one-to-one correspondence between the political and the personal – after all, Georges was six when he lied to his parents to prevent them from adopting Majid – it does suggest that political conflicts have their roots in family conflicts insofar as both the family and the nation

perpetuate, and operate according to, a similar politics of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not belonging.

The defining characteristic of European cinema, according to Ian Ang, that which makes it 'European', is Europe's refusal to recognise its own colonial guilt, which comes back to haunt it in the form of a self-indulgent, quasi-existential feeling of loss, whose real historical causes remain conveniently disguised: 'For the white European … it is all too easy to be overwhelmed by a redemptive but unproductive sense of loss, to cling to a residual identity and be stuck in it because it is so comforting … [It] is precisely a celebration of such a sense of loss, stripped of its historical particularity and universalised in terms of the predicament of the modern human condition, which we encounter all too often in European audiovisual culture' (1992: 26). From this point of view, the 'existential angst' that has become almost interchangeable with 'European cinema' is merely a cover-up for the historical guilt white Europeans desperately try to suppress. Too often European films (Antonioni's films, for instance) distract our attention from Europe's historical guilt by universalising it as a 'predicament of the modern human condition' and even reversing its meaning: they refigure guilt as existential melancholy, which redeems the guilty party instead of forcing on them an uncompromising self-examination. While the white European cinema Ang criticises disguises pressing social and political problems as existential angst, by insisting on the political nature of the personal Haneke demands that everyone consider their life as an act of bad faith. In another interview, included on the DVD of *The Seventh Continent*, Haneke recalls a Q & A session, following a screening of the film, in the course of which an audience member asked him if life in Austria was really as bleak as it was represented in the film. This kind of response is indicative of the viewer's unconscious repression of the problems raised in the film and of their convenient displacement onto a different national context. For Haneke, guilt is an objective rather than a subjective category: Georges' guilt, for instance, is independent from Majid's, that is, it does not ultimately matter whether or not Majid is telling the truth when he denies sending the tapes.

Despite the commonalities between Haneke's and Adorno's views on the status of the aesthetic under the conditions of mass culture, the *earnestness* with which Haneke revives familiar strategies and techniques we had assumed had lost their original subversive potential, his transparent – rather than self-conscious – modernist aesthetics, signals a new 'moment' or 'turn' in the critique of modernity and postmodernity. In the early 1980s Hal Foster declared the imminent obsolescence of Critical Theory's concept of the aesthetic as a 'negative category':

> The adventures of the aesthetic make up one of the great narratives of modernity: from the time of its autonomy through art-for-art's sake to its status as a necessary negative category, a critique of the world as it is. It is this last moment (figured brilliantly in the writings of Theodor Adorno) that is hard to relinquish: the notion of the aesthetic as subversive, a critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world. Now, however, we have to consider that this aesthetic space too is eclipsed – or rather, that its criticality is now largely illusory (and so instrumental). In such an event, the strategy of an Adorno,

of 'negative commitment', might have to be revised or rejected, and a new strategy of interference … devised. (1983: xv–xvi)

Haneke's films offer a glimpse of this new strategy of interference. Whatever his 'cold', unsentimental or 'super-intellectual' critique of middle-class complacency owes to Critical Theory (three of his earlier films – *The Seventh Continent*, *Benny's Video* and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* – have been appropriately called 'Vergletscherungs-Trilogie' or 'glaciation trilogy'), ultimately what distinguishes Haneke's films is their *untimeliness* (*Unzeitgemdssheit*), which emerges most strongly in the juxtaposition with Adorno's critique of pathos, seriousness and responsibility in art. The more art tries to be dignified, Adorno argued, the more ideological it becomes: the dignity of art demands that it give up the pretension of dignity. Haneke's films, however, are pervaded by an unmistakable sense of gravity – ethical, existential, political and aesthetic – that no amount of wit or irony can quite dissipate. There is a certain uncompromising, almost punitive moralism and earnestness that strike us as surprisingly untimely or perhaps even slightly embarrassing – the way the discovery of naivety in the midst of cynicism might appear 'embarrassing' – especially when we consider them against the background of the 'affected affectlessness' that constitutes the privileged postmodern stance. According to Christopher Sharrett (2004b), however, Haneke is anything but anachronistic: '[Haneke] rigorously eschews the snide humour, affectlessness, preoc-cupation with pop culture, movie allusions, and moral blankness of postmodern art. Yet nothing about Haneke's work seems anachronistic, precisely because he recog-nises that the crises that affected twentieth-century humanity, in particular alienation and repression, continue in the new millennium even if they are simply embraced as features of contemporary life in much postmodern artistic expression.'[15]

If there is one other filmmaker whose work conveys a similar sense of passionate detachment, in an unlikely combination with uncompromising moralism, it is David Lynch. Haneke and Lynch are masters of the uncanny – particularly the uncanniness of the banal and the everyday when it is decomposed, taken out of context, deprived of motivation, purpose or function – although Lynch develops the uncanny in the direc-tion of the surreal while Haneke takes it in the direction of the super-ordinary. As Jeff Johnson argues in *Pervert in the Pulpit: Morality in the Works of David Lynch* (2004) next to postmodernist filmmakers like Tarantino, for example, Lynch is a 'Po Mo Puritan', a director whose cool 'postmodern' visuals and convoluted narratives conceal an untimely, Old Testament-like vision of the world divided between the 'Forces of Evil' and the 'Forces of Good'. While Lynch's films combine a Po Mo coolness with an untimely, and from a certain perspective obsolete, puritanism, Haneke's reinvention of the type of realism promoted by Kracauer and André Bazin – the episodic slice-of-life narrative that brings together random and disparate events and phenomena – takes realism one step further by suggesting that when random events are considered together they are bound to produce certain results; that there are, in fact, no accidents for every event is from the very beginning ethically and politically implicated in every other event, just as every person is implicated in – and ultimately responsible for – the life of every other person. In other words, events whose causes remain occluded – suicide (*The Seventh*

Continent) or murder (*71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*), for example – are not accidental at all. The more one scratches the surface, the more one examines the superficial, the ordinary and the routine, rather than sounding the depths of existence for possible hidden causes and motives, the closer one gets to the truth of the matter, until the most random events appear nothing less than inevitable or destined.

Notes

1 Other theoretical frameworks within which Haneke's films have been discussed include Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, Paul Virilio's media theories, Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze (see Frey 2003).

2 Thus *Caché* (*Hidden,* 2005) reveals something truthful about its characters without however disclosing the 'hidden (caché) Truth' around which the entire film is structured: it remains unclear, and ultimately irrelevant, whether Majid is telling the truth or lying.

3 In *Der siebente Kontinent* (*The Seventh Continent*, 1989), for instance, Haneke deliberately uses close-ups of objects and enlarged faces that resemble television advertising in order to 'convey not just images of objects but the objectification of life' (see Sharrett 2004b).

4 Alternatively, for a discussion of Michael Haneke in the context of Austrian cinema see Dassanowsky (2007: 253–63).

5 'I try to make anti-psychological films with characters who are less characters than projection surfaces for the sensibilities of the viewer; blank spaces force the spectator to bring his own thoughts and feelings to the film. Because that is what makes the viewer open for the sensitivity of the character' (Haneke quoted in Frey 2003). Haneke's slow pacing of certain scenes or sequences, his use of long takes rather than montage, is dictated by the same desire to transfer the responsibility to the viewer: 'The faster something is shown, the less able you are to perceive it as an object occupying a space in physical reality, and the more it becomes something seductive' (Haneke quoted in Sharrett 2004b).

6 Several times we see Anna standing by the window, looking out, although there is nothing to see but an empty street. In moments like these, we are reminded of another European director 'specialising' in middle-class existential angst and maladjustment: in Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, 1964) Giuliana looks at the industrial wasteland around her and asks anxiously, 'What am I supposed to look at now?'

7 And yet the systematic way in which the family goes about the destruction of their material possessions matches the systematic obliviousness or automatism with which they were using them up until then. As Haneke notes, the sequence is 'portrayed as work' rather than as liberation (quoted in Sharrett 2004b). Although the couple decide to kill themselves because life is meaningless, they cannot help but turn their own death into a kind of secret project no one else is to know about: it is not enough for them to simply die for they insist on not leaving behind any

of their possessions, and they clearly need the cathartic experience of destroying everything that used to be of value – emotional or material – to them. In other words, even though Georg claims that their suicide is merely a statement of fact, the elaborate preparation and execution of the suicide suggests that they want it to be a *significant*, even if unmotivated, act.

8   Hence Mattias Frey (2003) divides Haneke's career into two phases: 'his initial feature films in the period 1988–1997, devastating critiques of Austrian society, funded predominantly by public Austrian funds, and … his last three efforts, investigations of broader European problems, financed in co-productions with largely French monies, starring high-profile French actors.'

9   The dialectic of globalisation and localisation informs Haneke's semiotics of space, particularly the polarity in his films between 'inside' and 'outside', 'private space' and 'public space'. Public spaces – the city street, the subway, the supermarket – are usually constructed, and privileged, as *sites of overexposure*: insofar as they openly stage a variety of ethnic, racial, social and political conflicts, such spaces function as potential sites of truthfulness. On the other hand, private spaces, usually identified with the domestic/family arena (in particular middle-class domestic space) are criticised as *sites of underexposure* or repression/bad conscience (*La Pianiste* (*The Piano Teacher*, 2001), *Hidden*, *The Seventh Continent*). See Mattias Frey (2003) for a discussion of Haneke's semiotics of space with reference to social theorist Marc Augé's notion of *surmodernité* ('supermodernity' or 'hypermodernity').

10   'I am trying as best I can to describe a situation as I see it without bullshitting or disingenuousness, but by doing so I subscribe to the notion that communication is still possible, otherwise I wouldn't be doing this' (Haneke quoted in Sharrett 2004b).

11   This flaw is partially redeemed by Haneke's skills in bringing into the open the usually hidden symbiotic relationship between the West and the East by means of a simple travelling shot taken from a car driving through a Romanian village: the shot shows a long series of houses under construction, all built with the money Romanians earn by working illegally in wealthy West European countries (France, Ireland and Italy).

12   'All important artworks, especially those concerned with the darker side of experience, despite whatever despair conveyed, transcend the discomfort of the content in the realisation of their form' (Haneke quoted in Sharrett 2004b).

13   See Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), for example.

14   As Mattias Frey (2003) argues, 'Haneke had always sought to position himself as the opposite of Tarantino, as the "last Modernist" whose bare, deliberate cinema treated violence and media with a non-titillating distance without the illusionist chicanery of Tarantino's multilayered association project.'

15   Although Haneke's films are a provocation against 'the moral blankness of postmodern art' they are still postmodern. The very structure of his films 'demonstrate[s] his postmodern transnational hybridity as a German-born filmmaker in Austria who utilises French casts' (Dassanowsky 2007: 254).

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