

Michael Haneke's *Caché*

## The artist has not done the most difficult work

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*Caché* (Hidden), written and directed by Michael Haneke

Michael Haneke, the director of *Caché* (Hidden), is an Austrian filmmaker who specializes in depicting episodes of social alienation and disconnection.

Brief descriptions of a few films may provide some sense of the overall thrust of his work. In *The Seventh Continent* (1989), a couple and their daughter lead a quiet life, but when the girl pretends to go blind, her parents lock themselves in their house, destroy all their belongings and eventually, themselves. In *The Moor's Head* (1994, which Haneke wrote but did not direct), a scientist, increasingly alarmed by the state of the world, loses his mind and—while his family is away—turns his apartment into an entirely self-sufficient space, with animals and plants growing under artificial light. In *Funny Games* (1997), a couple and their son are held captive and tortured at their lakeside summer home, for no apparent reason, by a couple of strange young men.

Haneke (born in 1942) often returns to the coldness of society. Speaking of Austria, he refers to “my country’s emotional glaciation.” An awful indifference and distance generally separate his characters. Intelligent but deliberately chilly, Haneke’s films have tended to register certain moods of the European middle class in recent decades—increasing paranoia and tension, a sense of being overwhelmed by events, perhaps xenophobia—without, however, shedding a great deal of light on them.

In the name of rejecting the facile approach of certain socially-conscious filmmakers of the past, directors such as Haneke (and he is one among many, particularly in Austria, Germany and France) evade the responsibility of adopting any strong or recognizable attitude toward contemporary society. In reality, this false objectivity, presented as ‘letting the audience think for itself,’ is a concession to a confused and stagnant political climate.

As often as not, Haneke evinces a disdain for—one is tempted to say “his victims”—his characters, usually well-to-do professionals. They are treated as so many bourgeois sheep or cattle, who exist primarily to be herded around to fit the filmmaker’s narratives. Haneke regards his protagonists, who are provided no inner lives and no genuine emotional independence, without a great deal of sympathy, and the director’s (and his admirers’) attitude seems to be that the mistreatment is fully deserved.

Why should this be so? If the characters act badly, then we will be willing to criticize or disapprove of them, but the director

apparently expects us to dislike them from the outset, because they live in well-furnished homes and drive late-model cars. These are telltale indicators of their self-delusion and false consciousness. This is a foolish “radicalism” that is too popular in Germany in particular. It means very little, except as a hint as to the circles in which the filmmakers travel.

Haneke’s disconcerting tales generally contain inexplicable, sometimes frightening elements. Admirers chalk this up to his insight into the supposedly nightmarish character of contemporary existence, dominated by anonymous bureaucratic and corporate powers. Less charitably, one may conclude that Haneke resorts to enigmatic twists and turns in part because he has not yet found a means of constructing a thoroughly convincing drama. At any rate, Haneke clearly taps into anxiety shared by a good many people.

In his *Caché*, a bourgeois couple (the husband hosts a television program about books) find themselves the targets of a singular kind of ‘stalking.’ They begin receiving lengthy videotapes of the front of their house, shot from right across the street. Then anonymous cards begin to arrive: a drawing of a child with a bloody mouth. Georges (Daniel Auteuil), the husband, has a hunch who might be behind this. On a visit to his mother, who lives in the country, he asks about a child of an employee that the family once wanted to adopt, Majid.

Next a tape arrives providing visual ‘directions’ to a hallway and a particular apartment. Georges takes the hint. It is Majid’s apartment, but the man, something of a wreck, denies sending the videos. Georges is aggressive and threatening. He tells his wife that no one was home, but a tape of his conversation with Majid appears. He confesses: Majid’s parents disappeared in the October 17, 1961 massacre of Algerians by the Paris police. His parents had wanted to adopt Majid, but he hadn’t wanted the child around, so he contrived to have him removed from the household.

Further disturbing and shocking events take place. In the end, Georges retreats to his bed, with sleeping pills.

Discussing his lead character’s dilemma, Haneke told an interviewer from *Die Tageszeitung*: “How do you behave when confronted with something that you should actually admit responsibility for? These are the sort of strategies that interest me, talking yourself out of guilt. It’s like this: we all believe we’re so fantastically liberal. None of us want to see immigration laws tightened. Yet when someone comes to me and asks if I could take

in a foreign family, then I say, well, not really. Charity begins at home with the door firmly shut. Most people are as cowardly and comfortable as I am.”

First of all, one is tempted to say: speak for yourself. This is a rather superficial, moralizing view of things, which will not take anyone very far.

In that same interview with the German newspaper, Haneke commented, “Georges should really question his whole way of life. But people never want to face up to that sort of thing.”

Again, this is where the director makes a critical mistake. ‘Georges should really question his whole way of life.’ Why precisely? He is the host of a television program dealing with literature, he has a wife and a child, he lives in a pleasant home. It may very well be that someone like Georges, a French petty bourgeois, rather pleased with himself, perhaps shut in emotionally, *should* criticize his whole way of life, but the filmmaker does not permit enough of that life to appear for us to know one way or the other. We are expected to take his word for it, as the result of a type of all too easy ‘radical’ shorthand (comfortable surroundings=hopeless bourgeois in need of ‘re-education’).

The actual content of Georges’ existence, apart from one nasty incident as a child, is withheld from us. His wife (Juliette Binoche) is largely a cipher. We are supposed to infer from his response to the videotapes and the cards a great deal. Far too much, as a matter of fact. An entirely innocent individual might respond with anger to being filmed and having his family harassed. Haneke *assumes* what he needs to *prove* dramatically, and socially. We know nothing about Georges, but we are expected to be hostile to him. Why should one do the artist’s work for him?

Haneke, in the same interview, associates, or allows to be associated, Georges’ mistreatment of Majid, as a six-year-old, with the legacy of French colonialism! This is simply light-minded. At Cannes last year, he told journalists, “I would be very unhappy if the film was reduced to the Algerian question. In every country, you could find the same political situation, like Yugoslavia or Austria. Rather, it’s a very personal film about guilt. You could talk about this character [Georges] who takes a couple of pills, closes the curtains, lies in bed trying to forget. We do the same with the Third World, give a couple of million dollars so we can forget.”

This is off the mark. It suggests that colonial wars take place, or suffering in the Third World, because of individual neglect or iniquity, rather than as the result of objective social processes, outside the control of individuals. Of course human beings have the responsibility to understand their world and respond to it, but they can only do so in a rational manner when they understand its law-governed character. Haneke is no doubt sincere, and he denounces Bush and French colonialism in a forthright manner, but his limited conceptions propel him the direction of a relatively cheap pointing of fingers.

He told *Die Tageszeitung*: “There’s such a thing as a sort of emotional memory for evil deeds. When a Proustian Madeleine appears by coincidence, then it all re-emerges. And anyway, I can’t pretend I don’t come from this Judeo-Christian tradition. The issue of guilt is always in the air at such latitudes. Which is

why I always come back to it. One of the thoughts which inspired the film was to confront someone with something that he’d done as a child. In cases like this we find it particularly comfortable to talk ourselves out of the problem.”

Georges was six years old! This is absurd. It very seriously trivializes the atrocities committed in Algeria and elsewhere to set up any kind of equivalence between an individual’s guilt over his unthinking cruelty as a child and the continuing responsibility of a modern imperialist state for a criminal policy it carried out decades before. One feels a little embarrassed to have to point this out.

In any case, why should a child have acted as Georges did? If it resulted from his background and upbringing, from a certain social milieu, then say so. But *Caché* chooses to paint a picture of parents who wanted to do the decent thing and a child who reacted malevolently. How is this to be explained? Was he simply a bad seed? If so, we’re heading back to something dangerously close to original sin.

Unfortunately, above all, one feels that the childhood events are a plot contrivance, a means of providing Georges with something to feel guilty about, which has some tenuous connection with the Algerian war and the 1961 massacre. But it simply doesn’t add up, psychologically or in any other way.

Haneke is sincere in his concerns, but his apparent belief that he can treat coldness with coldness, disconnection with disconnection, is false. Without considerable reflection and inner struggle, serious social analysis and compassion for human difficulty, one ends up with a mirror that merely reflects back at the spectator a vision of the world that is far too familiar, far too unmediated. And form has an impact on content. If Haneke would more conscientiously work out and deepen his dramas, make them internally consistent and convincing, that would almost inevitably lead him in the direction of a more realistic and penetrating appraisal of our present condition.



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