

Overheating the Melting Pot: Cultural Compositions in the Cinema of Michael Haneke

Aidan Power, University College Cork

‘In all its points, Europe is multiple; it is always home to tensions between numerous religious, cultural, linguistic, and political affiliations, numerous readings of history, numerous modes of relations with the rest of the world.’¹

This paper interacts with issues of identity and representation in the cinema of Michael Haneke. Unconventional in many respects, Haneke, an Austrian who directs predominantly French language films, is synonymous with contemporary European art-house cinema and renowned for the often-provocative images he conjures onscreen. Crucially for the purposes of this journal, he has a keen interest in contemporary European identity and revels in challenging conventional notions of what it is to be European, attempting as Mattias Frey has suggested ‘to lay bare the coldness of European society.’² With particular emphasis on the 2000 film *Code Unknown* (*Code Inconnu: Recit Incomplet de Divers Voyages*) I will examine Haneke’s cinematic ruminations on cultural identity and question the underlying social motifs that permeate his work, arguing that it is the very imperfections that characterise the societies and protagonists he depicts that define them.

An ensemble piece, *Code Unknown* examines contemporary French society from a number of perspectives, including those of Malian and Romanian emigrants, a theme he later expands upon in 2005’s *Cache* (*Hidden*) (wherein he directly juxtaposes the plight of white middle class intellectuals with that of first and second generation Algerians in contemporary France), calling to question the ramifications of French colonial memory in the twenty-first century. Haneke, I argue links his protagonists through the seemingly paradoxical prism of their differences, highlighting their contribution to wider societal difficulties yet suggesting that it is this same society which links them together, whether they realise it or not. Irrespective of ethnicity or class, the central characters of both *Code Unknown* and *Hidden* are bound by their sense of detachment, by an isolation that permeates their everyday existence. I contest that such detachments in Haneke’s work lead to the de-familiarisation of the ordinary, to the point where European protagonists’ inability to come to terms with the rapid evolution of their continent leads to a gradual disenchantment with their local environs. Building upon existing theory and practices, I will discuss these themes in relation to the ever-shifting composition of the European population, locating Haneke as a central figure in European cinema’s efforts to engage with the newly found realities that shape its immediate environs and those of its audience.

The opening scene of *Code Unknown* is willfully ambiguous and sets the tone for the film to follow. Following a title sequence which is bereft of music, the film opens with a shot of a young deaf girl, attempting to get her message across to her classmates in a game of charades. Guy Austin, suggests that *Code Unknown* ‘is a film about fear, an emotion acted out by a deaf girl in the opening sequence’³, a position that proposes that the girl can be seen as a surrogate representative of her local environment. John David Rhodes, meanwhile, perceptively proposes that ‘we

spectators occupy the position of the children in the prologue who attempt to interpret the dumb show, as we attempt to interpret the melodrama of *Code Unknown*'.⁴ As if to serve as a microcosm for what is to come, her multicultural companions struggle to understand her and fail to ascertain the meaning of her simulation. In the thirty-nine scenes that follow, Haneke presents us with snapshots of the lives of a number of seemingly disparate characters, including a white bourgeoisie couple, a Romanian illegal emigrant, a Malian family, as well as a rural farmer and his restless son, all of whom have considerable difficulty relating to the nuances of the society they inhabit. Throughout the film, it becomes clear that Haneke is less interested in reconciling the cultural differences that exist between his characters than he is in portraying them as constitutive parts of wider French society. Such an approach has led to criticism, particularly in France, where *Code Unknown* was seized upon by advocates of the political right, who claimed that it was an apt summation of the difficulties caused by immigration and of the perceived alienation endemic amongst French 'natives', in an increasingly ethnically diverse society. Criticised for its seeming coldness, many of Haneke's previously supportive critics, felt that he had produced too clinical a meditation on the difficulties encountered by a cultural melting-pot society and in doing so had almost reduced his protagonists to the status of commodities. Andrew James Horton, for example, suggests that 'Haneke seems so wrapped up in the formal qualities of *Code inconnu* that the very human message he is trying to give out is totally lost.'⁵ In this regard, it is my contention that Haneke is being done something of a disservice. A frequent criticism levelled at more mainstream (and in particular American) cinema's efforts to portray racial conflict and/or ethnic differences is that it often panders to, or worse, patronises its protagonists. Haneke, by way of contrast, offers no easy answers-just snapshots of the problems and avoids proffering solutions that could be said to be imperialist or occidental, those of the 'we could relate to you, if only you were more like us' variety. Unlike the thematically and structurally similar Hollywood production *Crash* (2005) for example, which won best picture at the 2006 *Academy Awards* and concerns racial and social tensions in a modern metropolis (in this case Los Angeles), *Code Unknown* does not offer life lessons to its viewers, at least not in such a pedantic fashion. Answers for Haneke appear to exist between the lines and borders of society and seldom manifest themselves readily. Furthermore, he seems to question the suitability of a film director acting as a social arbiter-instead perhaps he can be seen as a conduit of sorts, one who provokes interest in social issues, without claiming any moral pre-eminence. A keen student of philosophy, Haneke's films can often be seen as attempts to expose ideological complacency in viewers by probing the outlook of his protagonists, a stated intention being that 'characters should only be surfaces onto which the audience should project their own emotions and thoughts'.⁶ Epistemological theory asks us to question the truth behind the truth, or the controller behind the apparatus and in this respect, it is true that no film/filmmaker can be seen to be completely impartial. As Jean Louis Baudry notably pointed out 'the camera occupies an intermediate position in the work process'⁷, one of several constructs that are utilised at the behest of a party with a vested interest, irrespective of how noble that interest may be, leading to a situation where 'the spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees'.⁸ In this respect, Haneke can hardly be said to be completely impartial, repetition of key motifs coupled with a fondness for verisimilitude not only force the viewer into questioning onscreen depictions, but also the thought process that went into creating them. Nonetheless, I feel that he deliberately eschews comfortable western solutions of the

kind evinced in the work of many of his more commercial contemporaries. In the next passage, I will directly relate to this idea of imperialist overtures and show how Haneke interacts with and plays upon familiar constructs of cultural coding and identification.

‘Like Balibar, Haneke is interested in encounters between people who have nothing in common because it is precisely such conflicts that force people to question accepted ideas of ‘community’ and to think through the just distribution of human and civil rights.’ 9

A key tenet in Michael Haneke’s work is his dissection of what Benedict Anderson notably referred to as an ‘imagined community’ and the ‘inherent limitations’ that such communities represent. 10 In this regard, his treatment of language, itself a supposedly binding communal entity, is instructive, particularly in *Code Unknown*, where one of the most salient recurring themes is the power of silence. Despite the presence of a number of languages in the film, including French, Romanian, Malinke and Arabic, arguably the most meaningful and intimate interactions between characters are of the non-verbal variety. For all the tension between Jean (a restless teenager who longs to escape the limitations of his rural surrounds) and his father, they are seen to work in tandem (and in silence), pitch-forking hay in an almost somnambulant scene, their differences dissipated by the absence of dialogue. Furthermore, in a bid to express tenderness, the emotionally stunted father buys his son a motorcycle and crucially for our purposes, presents it to him in complete silence, a gesture reciprocated in turn by Jean who speeds off excitedly. The dissonance between the two ultimately proves to be irreconcilable, but that is not to say that there is not a bond between them; indeed, silence is used paradoxically to demonstrate the possibility of communication. Haneke elucidates on this idea of the power of non-verbal communication in the film’s closing scene-played out over the beating of drums-performed by the partially Malian Amadou and his colleagues, as a means of interacting with the aforementioned class of deaf children. This conclusion has been seen as uplifting in some quarters and in others, as a wry counterpoint to the travails of central protagonists, who are seemingly back where they started, as exemplified by the Romanian immigrant Maria who has returned to a life of begging on the streets of Paris. It is not my intention to debate this argument here-indeed I feel Haneke’s conclusion is sufficiently open ended to allow for manifold interpretations. Instead, I wish to call attention to the drums themselves and focus on their almost primordial sound and their racial and geographical connotations. In a film centering on the societal difficulties encountered in contemporary urban Europe, it is curious that Haneke should conclude with a distinctly non-European and thus ‘other’ musical arrangement. Drums have long been coded as exotic, other and dangerous in traditional Hollywood productions dealing with Western characters’ experiences in Africa (*The African Queen*, *Tarzan* films, etc.),¹¹ yet Haneke plays upon this rather base construct by reversing the order of encroachment. Instead of drums representing danger for heroic Western protagonists in a foreboding continent, they are here heard to sound a defiant note in a European mainland with a decidedly insecure population. In an article entitled “Michael Haneke and the Discontents of Europe”, Christopher Sharrett comments that the drums suggest that ‘communication happens only at an atomized, insulated level’¹² and as such is representative of the malaise in French society, yet here I would demur slightly, to suggest that the drums link disparate scenes together. Haneke does not contrive to present a Western/imperialist solution to

a cross-cultural/intercontinental problem-there is no reconciliation of his protagonists' travails, but what is present is the defiant beating of drums, a constant in the closing scene, linking multiple cultures together-however tenuously, as opposed to being distant and layered with negative colonial connotations. The multi-cultured/ethnic children who partake in the music class are unified by the drums, which, shorn of imperialist subtexts, are exuberant and sound a cautious message of hope, but are not an end in themselves. As we see Maria return to the streets, it becomes clear that learning to exist together without dialogue is but the first step, an important one perhaps, but there is much left to be done.

'My films are intended as polemical statements against the American 'barrel down' cinema and its dis-empowerment of the spectator. They are an appeal for a cinema of insistent questions instead of false (because too quick) answers, for clarifying distance in place of violating closeness, for provocation and dialogue instead of consumption and consensus.' 13

For a further illustration of Haneke's rejection of a Western intellectual hegemony, it is worth noting the scene in which Amadou and his white girlfriend go out for a meal together. Arriving some forty-five minutes late for the booking, Amadou's unnamed girlfriend nervously plays with her watch whilst they await service. Noting this, Amadou proclaims that he dislikes her watch, whereupon she proceeds to remove it and discard it into an ashtray, resulting in an uneasy silence between the two. When the waiter arrives he points to the presence of the watch and is informed that it does not belong to Amadou or his girlfriend, whereupon the two resume the earlier flow of their conversation. In a film notable for its ambiguity and the wide scale of its critique, this scene can appear almost incongruous or inconsequential. However, it does serve as a gentle reminder of Amadou's individuality and his reluctance to compromise his pace of life for anyone. He wishes to live in the moment and is affronted by the spectre of any temporal parameters to this goal. His ethical code is earlier violated by Jean, who treats Maria (now reduced to begging on the street), with contempt by nonchalantly tossing a paper bag in her direction and he is quick to respond-confronting the teenager and demanding that he apologise for his gesture. Here his actions are more subtle, but achieve the desired result-a rare triumph for Amadou, who struggles to assert himself in a society seemingly indifferent to his plight, yet it is shown to be no more than a Pyrrhic victory by the scene's end. At a nearby table, Jean's sister-in-law Anne (played by Juliette Binoche) informs her husband Georges that Amadou was the 'black kid' who had 'attacked' Jean earlier in the day-thus identifying him as other and dismissing his moral arguments in the process. Not for the first time in a Haneke film, characters' assumptions are given precedence due to an inability to interact with one other. In this respect, the roots of societal tension, as relayed by Haneke, run deeper than mere misunderstanding: there is an abject lack of willingness amongst protagonists to engage with one another. A patina of cultural tolerance is evident amongst Anne and her bourgeois friends, but the emergence of base human emotions such as anxiety and fear expose the shallow nature of such acceptance in both them and the society they inhabit and despite Amadou's seemingly noble intentions, he is looked upon with antipathy and suspicion. Furthermore, Haneke invites us to question Amadou's motives for helping Maria earlier in the film when she is treated with disrespect by the indignant Jean. Far from emerging unscathed from the incident, Maria is left exposed by the affair and inadvertently suffers as a consequence of his actions. Having previously managed to

remain inconspicuous, her legal status is called to question by the policemen who attempt to quell the fracas between Amadou and Jean. Amadou however, does not enquire after Maria, nor does he have any further contact with her, leading one to ponder whether his actions had more to do with self-gratification than with genuine concern for her welfare. When looked upon in this light, it is tempting to see the episode as a parable concerning the futility of foreign intervention on a larger scale. One need not look too far to identify examples where moral ascendancy, as well as local knowledge is assumed by prominent nation states when seeking to liberate others. In this regard, Jack Nicholson's bumbling private eye Jake Gittes comes to mind when he says that he passed his time in *Chinatown* by doing 'as little as possible'.¹⁴ The underlying message in Roman Polanski's classic *film noir* was that when in unfamiliar territory, even well intended actions can reap undesirable results, a theme taken up by Haneke and transported to a postcolonial European landscape, one where empathy is often undermined by hitherto concealed prejudices and assumptions.

'As such, Haneke has no answers to give us on immigration or multiculturalism. He merely urges us to question the reality of the issues around it. In this he does, perhaps, have a major point. Immigration is largely seen as a subject for political debate and a topic that dominates newspaper headlines. Rarely do we stop to consider the stories of the people behind the statistics, who they are and how the single word "immigrant" describes a multitude of experiences.'¹⁵

By way of conclusion, I feel it apt to ponder Andrew James Horton's assertion in the above quote. Far from viewing Haneke's ostensible passivity as a criticism, I feel the reticence he displays throughout *Code Unknown* is commendable. While he later sees fit to offer an arguably more pointed critique of Europe's colonial legacy in *Hidden* - equating the guilt of a middle class intellectual with the collective responsibility of the nation he inhabits, in *Code Unknown*, Haneke is content to sketch an outline of the postcolonial difficulties that Europe as a community encounters on a daily basis. In addition to providing a platform from which to conduct a survey of a broad cross-section of society, his multi-narrative storyline forces viewers to derive their own meaning from often deliberately underdeveloped scenes. Frequently scenes are cut-mid conversation, whilst time restrictions negate the possibility of background information and character development. This de-familiarisation of both societal and cinematic constructs entices the viewer to think, and in doing so, to question their own ethical motivations. Ascribing attributes to characters entails the utilization of a necessary level of assumption, and assumption as the protagonists of *Code Unknown* find out, can often lead to discomfort, misunderstanding and alienation.

1. Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, (Princeton: University of Princeton, 2004), p 5.
2. Mattias Frey, 'A Cinema of Disturbance: The Films of Michael Haneke in Context', *Senses of Cinema*, (September-October 2003).
3. Guy Austin, 'Drawing Trauma: Visual Testimony in *Caché* and *J'ai 8 Ans*', *Screen*,

- 48.4 (2007), 529-536 (p. 532).
4. John David Rhodes, 'Haneke, The Long Take, Realism', *Framework*, 47.2 (2006), 17-21 (p. 18).
 5. Andrew James Horton, 'Locked Out! Michael Haneke's Code inconnu: Recit incomplete de divers voyages', *Central Europe Review*, 3.19 (2001) [http://http://www.ce-review.org/01/19/kinoeye19_horton.html](http://www.ce-review.org/01/19/kinoeye19_horton.html) [accessed 1 April 2009]
 6. Frey, 'A Cinema of Disturbance'.
 7. Jean Luc Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', in Philip Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: a Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p 40.
 8. Ibid. p.45.
 9. Temenuga Trifonova, 'Code Unknown: European Identity in Cinema', *Scope*, 8 (2007) <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/index.php> [accessed 28 March 2009]
 10. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).
 11. Clara Henderson, 'When Hearts Beat like Native Drums: Music and the Sexual Dimensions of the Notions of Savage and Civilized in Tarzan and his Mate, 1934', *Africa Today*, 48.4 (2001), 91-124 (p. 92).
 12. Christopher Sharrett, 'Michael Haneke and the discontents of European Cinema', *Framework*, 47.2 (2006), 6-16 (p. 14).
 13. Michael Haneke, "Film als Katharsis" in Francesco Bono (ed.), *Austria (in)felix: zum österreichischen Film der 80er Jahre*, (Graz: Blimp, 1992), p. 89.
 14. Chinatown, dir. By Roman Polanski (Paramount, 1974).
 15. Horton, 'Locked Out!'.

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