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Performative Self-Contradictions

Michael Haneke's Mind Games

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Writing about Michael Haneke has been a learning curve, mostly about how to deal with the ambivalence his films invariably provoke. Far from having been able to resolve the sense of being divided, discomfited, and often on the verge of disgust, my mixed feelings about his films have deepened, though not without a twist: Haneke also took me into directions and places of the contemporary experience that were as much a discovery as they were unsettling. Before I began, my view was roughly as follows: shock and awe after seeing *Caché* (2005), intrigued and interested by *Code Unknown* (2000), uneasy and queasy about *The Piano Teacher* (2001), repelled and exasperated by *Funny Games* (1997) and *Benny's Video* (1992), and not a little bored by *71 Fragments* (1994) and *The Seventh Continent* (1989). After reseeing these (and a few other) films and letting them do their disturbing work, my ambivalences, initially targeting the director, started to shift to the world he depicts, and then to the filmic means he deploys. Now I feel I have come full circle, but emerged on the other side: Focused first on the messenger, and then on the message, my doubts ended up being directed at the recipient: me, the spectator. As Haneke might put it: case proved.

Haneke and Film Philosophy

Haneke's films, I want to argue, exhibit to the point of possible contradiction, but they also expose, to the point of celebrating the resulting deadlocks, the pitfalls of an epistemological conception of the cinema. At the same time, and unlike others who have also voiced doubts about the cinema's inherent realism, Haneke does not embrace a phenomenological perspective. His films play with, but do not endorse, the cinema's purported truth claims, usually made by pointing to photography as the basis of indexical evidence ("photographic realism"), or

appealing to ocular verification and human observation ("scientific realism"): both would full under what I call the *epistemological* position. An *ontological* position – arguably attributable to Siegfried Kracauer, Gilles Deleuze, and Stanley Cavell – would contend that the cinema's unique strength is to rescue the everyday, by redeeming the mundane and recognizing a place for contingency in human affairs. But cinema can also restore to us our "belief in the world," by the paradoxical affirmation that the meaninglessness of things (as they appear to the mechanical eye which is the camera) may actually be our best hope: not for making sense of, but for giving sense *to* our lives. This, too, would be an unlikely position for Haneke to hold, considering his grim view on contingency and chance (of which more later). According to the *phenomenological* position, finally, the cinema provides the consciousness and knowledge of the world, but not by concentrating on the look, the gaze, the mirror-phase, or locking the subject into a panoptic prison of vision and visuality.[1] Instead, phenomenology espouses a more holistic approach, extending vision beyond the disembodied eye and conceiving of an "embodied" and active consciousness, at work in the filmic experience, which in turn gives new value to touch, contact, skin, and the material body of cinema: tactile sensations and haptic vision, the accent or grain of the voice and of the video signal, the interactive, immersive potential of digital images.

Little of this seems at first to apply to Haneke's work and yet, how can it not? Up until the critical success of *Caché*, the difficulty in placing his films in the current debates tended to polarize the film critical community. Those interested in the philosophical aspects of contemporary cinema have only begun to engage with his work, whether negatively or positively.[2] As a consequence, Haneke's reputation has tended to align his admirers, as well as steer the discussion about his films, along classically auteurist lines.[3] A little too conveniently, perhaps, a European, state-funded, high-culture director-as-artist pronounces himself – ex cathedra, via interviews, and ex opera, through the message extrapolated from his films – on the prevailing evils of the world, namely, lack of meaningful interpersonal communication, coldness between marital partners, neglect by parents of their children. In interviews, Haneke also tends to denounce media trivialization and Hollywood violence, often with the implication that the former (coldness and indifference of the world) is caused by the latter (Americanization and the mass media).[4]

Elsewhere, I have tried to argue that attributing such a representative function to the "author" risks doing a disservice to European cinema in a globalized film culture, besides joining prejudice with complacency vis-à-vis the American cinema and so-called "Americanization."[5] In other words, were I to judge by these criteria alone, I would be hard put to justify to myself why I should be writing about Haneke. And yet, his recent, notably the French-made, films seem to be on the cusp of something else that intrigues me sufficiently to revisit my prejudices. For instance, I detect an auto-critique of Haneke's so often confidently asserted moral high ground, and of his forthright – some might say misanthropic – positions as a European auteur. With a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, Haneke's

private ethics of guilt does creative battle with a public imagination of shame. In the figure of the clumsy, alcoholic, faith-abandoned priest in *Lemmings* (1979) one senses the negative "Protestant" theology of Ingmar Bergman more strongly than the austere but redemptive Jansenism of Robert Bresson, with whom Haneke's moral universe has been compared.[6] I also read the film-within-the-film interrogation scene in *Code Unknown* ("show me your real face") as offering almost a pastiche of his early work, just as I see more of a self-portrait in the central character of *Caché* than his genealogy as yet another bourgeois "Georges" would at first seem to warrant. Indeed, there may be in *Caché* another auto-portrait of the director in the figure of the guest at the dinner party, telling a shaggy dog story about an old lady whom he reminded of her deceased dog: It not only foreshadows plot developments in *Caché* itself – the reference to a neck wound being the most obvious one – but it is also a moment of self-reference, in that it thematizes Haneke's own way with coincidence, predetermination, and their manipulation by a raconteur or storyteller, while harking back to a similarly spooky story in *Lemmings* about a dead canary, prompting the female lover listening to ask anxiously, "Is it true?," to which the man gives the revealingly ambiguous answer, "I think so." Finally, one senses in the French films that Haneke is perfectly aware of the possibility of paradox (or deadlock) in his position on "realism and truth," and that he has been exploring other strategies, notably those of the equally productive and equally contradictory notion of "game," which nonetheless might allow for a more properly philosophical grounding of his cinema (for the critics) and (for the filmmaker himself) might open his work up to a less dystopian view of a world irreversibly in the grip of media manipulation, and thus condemned to mendacity, deceit, and self-delusion.

The paradox I struggle with in Haneke's earlier work concerns above all his claim that one can "critique" violence through violence: In his interviews, the director suggests that by subjecting the spectator to witnessing, experiencing, or actively imagining acts of extreme violence, he can make him or her "aware" of the nefarious role that violence plays in our modern, media-saturated world. To me this is a dubious claim, and a contradictory one, on two grounds. Dubious, on what one might call didactic grounds: To "rape" an audience into enlightenment, or to educate someone by giving them "a slap in the face," seems to come from a rather peculiar corner of Germanic pedagogy that I thought we had no need to revive, either in schools or on the screen. Stanley Kubrick (and Anthony Burgess) called it the Ludovico Treatment – after Ludwig van Beethoven, whose Ninth Symphony is used as a Pavlovian aversion therapy – and in this respect at least, Haneke reminds me of Alex, not the young thug but the liberal writer in *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), who, having been made to witness the rape and murder of his wife, retaliates by advocating this enlightened form of punishment, whose only flaw is to deprive the wrongdoer of his free will. It is an open question how serious Haneke is about his raping the audience, but to me his provocative formulations prove that he is very well aware of what a knot

of contradictions he is potentially tying himself into. Yet even if he may be hoisting himself on his own petard, it still looks like he is determined to demonstrate both to his characters and to the audience that they are deprived of "free will." This is the second, more philosophical reason I have trouble with his position, but also find it fascinating. Haneke's stance on cinematic violence, no less than his views on chance and free will, involve what the discourse philosopher Karl Otto Apel would call a performative self-contradiction, a version of the conundrum better known as the liar's paradox: All Cretans are liars, says the Cretan.[7] Violence is bad for you, says the director who inflicts violence on me. But Haneke is also the control freak who likes to play games with chance and coincidence. Once formulated, the paradox becomes interesting, because it ties not only Haneke in knots, but also Haneke's critics, who risk putting themselves into a double bind, contradicting Haneke contradicting them.

In what follows I want to explore this idea of performative self-contradiction in Haneke, because I think his position – and not only his – relies on what I would call the "epistemological fallacy," that is, the often implicit assumption that the cinema is capable of making valid truth claims, while explicitly criticizing most films and filmmakers, notably mainstream directors, for failing to come up to these standards. The fallacy, in other words, puts the cinema on a pedestal, to better push its practitioners off theirs, compounded by the implication that the cinema is a virgin whom directors have turned into a whore, while audiences who love this whorish cinema are themselves depraved. Embedded in Haneke's negative judgment about today's cinema and its effects is an assumption beneath the assumption, constantly asserted but also constantly put in question: namely, that the cinema can be a vehicle for secure, grounded knowledge if only it is used in the "right" way. But even Bazin argued that the cinema's realism is real only to the extent that we believe in its reality. In fact, the epistemological fallacy is typical not so much of realist film theory, as it was proposed by advocates of neo-realism in the 1950s, as of the critiques of realist aesthetics as they have been voiced in ideological accounts and constructivist theories since the 1970s, when Bazin's theories, among others, were denounced as "naïve." Haneke, a filmmaker who came to artistic maturity in the 1970s, evidently shares this belief in "consciousness-raising": By forcing us to "see" something, he can make us "know" something, and by making us know something, we will be able to act accordingly, that is, for the betterment of ourselves and, by extension, of the world. But what if seeing does not lead to knowing, and knowing does not enable action? Sigmund Freud would have understood the problem, and Gilles Deleuze, in his analysis of the movement-image, provides historical as well as film-philosophical reasons why a cinema of consciousness-raising will remain a problematic proposition.[8]

One radical way of unraveling the double bind of self-contradiction in the epistemological fallacy would be to conceive of the cinema as something altogether different than a "realist" medium. Several philosophers, besides Deleuze, have tried to think this through: Jean-Luc Nancy, for instance, also chose to put the matter

in the form of a contradiction: "the lie of the image is the truth of our world," elaborating around it a theory of "evidence," which for him is an ontological category rather than an epistemological one.[9] Or one might turn to another French philosopher, Alain Badiou, for whom "[i]t is the principle of the art of the cinema to show that it is only cinema, that its images only bear witness to the real insofar as they are manifestly images. It is not in turning away from appearance or in praising the virtual that you have a chance of attaining Ideas. It is in thinking appearance as appearance, and therefore as that, which from being, comes to appear, gives itself to thought as deception of vision."[10] In other words, Badiou, too, puts forward an "ontological" view of the cinema, where the inherent limits of vision, its dwelling in the realm of appearances, are the very grounds on which the cinema's realism can be justified.

Funny Games or Mind Games?

From an epistemological perspective, Haneke, it would seem, has painted himself into a corner, and nowhere more so than in *Funny Games*, which is said to confront us with our voyeurism, but does so by brutally exploiting it. However, in terms of the argument I am here advancing, *Funny Games* is disturbing mainly because of its own kind of performative self-contradiction, that is, the unusually wide gap between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enunciated: a gap for which the concept of "lying" seems radically inadequate. Peter and Paul's jovially polite words, contrasted with their horrible acts, their constant invitation, bordering on reproachful admonition, to play along with the game and not be spoilsports, while clearly announcing the lethal stakes they intend to play for, instantiate such a purposeful discrepancy between words and actions, gesture and intent, that they constitute an extremely potent critique of the very model of consciousness-raising, with its chain of seeing, feeling, knowing, acting (what Deleuze would call the sensory-motor schema of the movement-image) that Haneke implicitly needs to appeal to in order to maintain his moral high ground. *Funny Games* in this respect is comparable to, but also the reverse of, *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), which operates a similar disjuncture, while retrieving it, making it bearable, thanks to the different function that chance and contingency play both within Tarantino's story-world and in the overall narrative trajectory, which famously jumbles chronology and causality, wrongfooting us in its own way into thinking that what we are seeing is actually a happy ending, when the opposite is the case (whatever "is the case" might mean). *Funny Games'* relentlessness and irreversibility – powerfully underscored by the impossible and impossibly ironic "rewind" – highlights the one-way contract that the film proposes to the viewer, rubbing it in that we wish for a happy ending but won't get one, not because that is the way life is, but because the director has decreed it so, letting chance in by the front door, as it were, only

then to bolt all the doors and windows from the inside. On the other hand, because of these unresolved tensions between contingency and determinism, *Funny Games* seems to me interesting precisely insofar as it is symptomatic of a wider tendency in contemporary cinema – what I have elsewhere called "mind-game movies" – where a number of assumptions about how we understand what we see and hear in a film, as well as what comprises agency, are tested and renegotiated.[11]

My suggestion would be that besides *Funny Games*, *Code Unknown* and *Caché* also qualify as mind games, albeit in ways that would have to be further specified, for instance, with respect to agency and control. Their sado-masochistic under-tow of revenge and guilt calls for special comment, as does the manner in which the masters of the game in Haneke's films reveal themselves. Although *Funny Games* would seem to fit the mind-game mold almost too perfectly, *Code Unknown* and *Caché*, while intermittently playing their own sadistic games, also propose to us a more indeterminate or at least less deterministic way of thinking about the cinema's ontological and epistemological status, especially when Haneke reinvests in the notion of game and play, distinctly different from the games being played in *Funny Games*, and yet perhaps related nonetheless. If Haneke (mark I) comes across as an unreconstructed epistemological realist, Haneke (mark II) approximates an ontological realist, a position from which he both revises and rescues Haneke (mark I). Although I will not be able to fully substantiate these assertions about a possible "turn" in Haneke's work, I risk advancing this suggestion, not by rehearsing the classic themes of Haneke's work, but by using some of them to speculate on his cinema's ontological hesitations and cognitive switches, with their potential enfolding (or *Aufhebung*) in the idea of "frames" and "games."

Three Haneke Themes

There is widespread consensus about Haneke's principal themes, so I hope I will be forgiven for not speaking about "glaciation," "repression," Haneke's critique of middle-class coupledom, the bourgeois nuclear family, or his hatred of in-stitutional life, such as schools, offices, banks, or the Austrian army, police, and military academy.[12] However, I was intrigued by the extent to which certain of his themes have already been canonized, as can be gauged from Haneke's French Wikipedia entry, where one finds the following list:

- the introduction of a malevolent force into comfortable bourgeois existence, as seen in *Funny Games* and *Caché*;
- a critique directed towards mass media, especially television, as seen in *Funny Games*, where some of the characters are aware that they feature in a movie, and *Benny's Video*;

- the unwillingness to involve oneself in the actions and decisions of others, as seen in *Lemminge*, *Benny's Video*, *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* and *Code inconnu: Récit incomplet de divers voyages*;
- characters named Georges and Anna (or some alternate version of those names).[13]

Borrowing three of these themes – the "introduction of a malevolent force," the "media critique," and the "unwillingness to involve oneself in the actions of others," I shall briefly recontextualize them, also within film history, in order to facilitate the lead into my main argument.

The intruder as *deus ex machina*

The intruder or "home-invader" is a standard character/motivator of the horror film, of course, but he is also a relatively prominent feature of the European art film. On one level, he (and it is mostly a "he") acts as a catalyst or "trigger" for an internal crisis of self-deconstruction or auto-implosion, often of the nuclear family unit. An early example in Haneke is the homeless tramp who comes to knock on Evi's door in *Lemmings*, and whose hand she squashes (in a visual reference to *Un chien andalou* [Luis Buñuel, 1929]): an experience that subsequently serves as a telling index for the degree of affective breakdown in Evi's marriage.

Roman Polanski's films might be cited as classic precursors of this motif – from the young man in *Knife in the Water* (1962), to *Repulsion* (1965) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), via *Cul-de-sac* (1966), all the way to *Bitter Moon* (1992) and *Death and the Maiden* (1994). But the acts of intrusion in *Funny Games* and *Caché* are more comparable in their psychodynamics and social pathology to Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963), Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971), or the already mentioned *A Clockwork Orange*, rather than to the films on the theme of intrusion that are contemporaneous with Haneke's work, such as *Bin Jip/Empty Houses/Three Irons* (2004) by Kim Ki-duk, which incidentally also features a lethal golf club, or *Die Fetten Jahre sind vorbei* (Hans Weingärtner, 2004). In *Caché* (as in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, 2001) the "malevolent" force impinging is clearly as much inside as outside the central character; indeed, it might be identical with the family unit (if we follow the suggestion that perhaps Pierrot, Georges's and Anna's son, is in on the "game" with the tapes and drawings). In *The Seventh Continent* the malevolent force intruding is, so to speak, life itself, in its eternal recurrence of the Same.

From another perspective, however, the intruder is a positive figure: He can open new possibilities, create forks in the road, or even introduce orders of being that previously were not apparent. I wonder, for instance, if Haneke's didacticism in *Caché* about bourgeois *mauvaise foi* and his moralizing about France's repressed colonial past might not prevent the viewer from seeing something else in this constellation of the bourgeois household. Is there not also the hint that the permeability of inside and outside, of private and public, of classic individualist

self-surveillance and the displacement or delegation of such self-monitoring to an external agency are part of broader cultural shifts? And that these shifts can actually be seen to have beneficial as well as nefarious effects, if not on the individual, then on the community? The model would be what Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek have called "interpassivity," according to which belief, conscience, guilt, but also pleasure and enjoyment, are being "outsourced," as it were, and delegated to others, so that one can participate in "life" by proxy (a solution, if you like, to the problem alluded to earlier, of knowing too much and not being able to take responsibility and action).[14] Alternatively, it would be instructive to compare the intruder in Haneke to the intruder/outsider, say, in Pasolini's *Theorem* (1968), in Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others* (2001) (an especially intriguing example of belief and interpassivity), or, for that matter, in Lars von Trier's films, notably *Dogville* (2003). Haneke, it seems, leaves open the question of whether the intruder in his films is malevolent, benevolent, or both, and thus he joins other international directors in an ongoing reflection on one of the key issues of the new century: the difficult realignment of public and private sphere, of exclusion and inclusion, and – mostly subtly – exclusion *through* inclusion.[15]

Involving oneself in the actions and decisions of others

In addition, I want to argue that the third theme listed on Wikipedia – "the unwillingness to involve oneself in the actions and decisions of others" – should be seen as belonging to the theme of the intruder, as part of either a dialectical reversal or an instance of interpassivity. Several of the films just mentioned explore – precisely in the context of the classic "outsider" of the European cinema (in Godard, Wenders, Varda, Fassbinder, Angelopoulos) now having turned outsider-intruder (in Akin, Kaurismäki, Jeunet, and others) – the idea that such intrusion need not be intended to destroy or kill or wreak emotional havoc. The new type of "housebreaker" is more likely to bring about a small but crucial perceptual adjustment in "the lives of others": elsewhere, I have called this "double occupancy" and shown how it applies (besides *The Others*, *The Lives of Others* [Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006], *Bin-Jip*, *Vive l'amour* [Ming-liang Tsai, 1994]) even to comedies, such as the critically dismissed but symptomatic Euro-successes *Goodbye Lenin* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) and *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001): films where the intruders have a more equivocal role in the commerce of intersubjectivity and interpersonal relationships.[16]

Critique of the media

Perhaps the most common of commonplaces about Haneke is his critique of the mass media. One Internet blogger has conducted an interview with himself about

Haneke. In response to the question "What about the role of the media?" his alter ego says: "Ah, yes. The media is a reliable Haneke bête noire. He worked in television for fifteen years and reserves for it his choicest vitriol."[17] By way of mitigating circumstance, one could argue that Haneke, like other filmmakers, is most eloquent in his critique – especially of the general mediatization of domestic life, colonized by the television set – when he speaks from the modernist high perch of the less tainted, because more self-reflexive, "art (of) cinema." His switch from television to feature films (motivated, he said, by the decision of the television broadcaster who had commissioned *The Seventh Continent* to shelve it unscreened) has left him, so the argument runs, more independent and free, uncompromised by commercial pressures or having to "sell out" to the ratings. But it seems that Haneke himself knew that any "setting oneself off from television by making cinema" (as had been the call of directors of the New German Cinema in the 1970s) was not an option (in countries like Germany, Austria, and to a large extent even in France, where film production is mostly underwritten by public service broadcasting, the taxpayer, and the occasional commercial television company). Similarly, his 2007 remake of *Funny Games* in the US is an acknowledgment that it is has become less credible to critique "bad" Hollywood cinema in the name of "good" European auteur cinema (another frequent argument in the 1970s). In fact, there are moments in *Funny Games U.S.* that could be seen not only as an attack on gratuitous violence in mainstream cinema, but also as Haneke's auto-critique of his earlier films, such as *Lemmings*, when Paul explains Peter's behavior by calling him "a spoiled child tormented by ennui and world weariness, weighed down by the void of existence" (an almost verbatim quote from the earlier film), while winking at the camera.

Framing, and Reframing

A more productive way of understanding how Haneke's films qualify for the label "mind-game movies" and how they are able to suggest different levels of reality or reference without playing one medium off against another – that is, cinema against television, or art cinema against Hollywood – is to focus on a feature that is arguably one of Haneke's most significant contributions to the cinema today, namely, his deployment of the cinematic frame. The choice of frame, the act of reframing, or the refusal to move the camera in order to reframe are not only distinctive traits of Haneke's visual style, they are also something like an entry-point or, indeed, a frame of reference for his moral universe and his struggle with the relation between contingency and determinism. Again, it might be useful to see his work at the cusp of several possibilities. On the one hand, with framing Haneke achieves the sort of distancing effects that have earned him the epithet "Brechtian" – with some justification, when one thinks of all the didactic framings

that willfully withhold information that we, as spectators, are expected to expect. This is the case with the family members in *The Seventh Continent*, whose faces we do not see until some 10 or 15 minutes into the film, or the notorious kitchen scene in *Funny Games*. Other kinds of framing, such as the ones in the metro in *Code Unknown*, are not so readily described as Brechtian and might be called distantiation effects only insofar as they "create a distance which collapses distance," that is, they create an inner distance, for which there is no room or space – in other words, almost the opposite of distancing.

This is in contrast to earlier, and again more conventionally Brechtian ways of distancing the spectator, when Haneke is reminding us of the fact that we are watching a film. The fades to black in *The Seventh Continent*, the manipulation of the video footage in *Benny's Video*, the references to the cinema and the moments of direct address in *Funny Games*, the film-within-a-film in *Code Unknown* are some of the better-known instances, but as *Code Unknown*'s interrogation scene shows, the more effective effect is to deprive the spectator of distance, which is to say, of a "reality-versus-fiction" frame: The effect is not to make us aware of being voyeurs and in the cinema, but to undermine even the voyeuristic ground on which we normally arrange ourselves as cinemagoers. If until that point in the film we thought ourselves safe and "outside," we now realize how generally unsafe we are and how we may be caught "inside" whenever we are in the cinema: If classical narrative cinema's spectator felt safe at any distance, however close he or she got, the spectator of Haneke's films might be said to be unsafe at any distance, however far that person thinks he or she is. This would be a prime instance of an ontological hesitation, requiring a cognitive switch, to which I referred earlier, and such moments are the hallmarks of the mind-game genre.

To mind-game films also apply what Henri Bergson has said about the image in general: "An image – situated between representation and the thing – is forever vacillating between definitions that are incapable of framing it."[18] In other words, mind-game films propose to us images that are at once overframed and unframed, and they thereby differ from films thematizing character subjectivity or mediated consciousness. Whereas the latter – the films of, say, Atom Egoyan, Wim Wenders, or early Haneke – use the different media technologies of 16 and 35 mm celluloid, of camcorder home movies, grainy photographs, or of video footage as auto-referential materials, signifying different levels of consciousness by which to "layer," combine, and contrast past and present, memory and history, private and public as so many distinct "frames of reference," mind-game films tend to go the other way. Rather than ratcheting up the degrees of reflexivity and self-reference, they do their utmost to remove many of these kinds of frames, and to make their embedded frames "invisible." It is with this distinction in mind that one might want to reexamine Haneke's use of framing, and in particular his use of the plan fixe/static shot and the plan-séquence/long take.

The plan fixe/static shot

Despite his reputation as Brechtian, Haneke seems to have gone to some lengths to identify himself also by a "realism" that film scholars associate with the Bazinian tradition of realism and neo-realism. Examples often invoked are the long takes in *Code Unknown*, the deep focus in the many shots through passageways, corridors, or, most often, through open or half-open doors.[19]

By contrast, the scene in the metro in *Code Unknown* depends for its extraordinarily complex effects on the unusual combination of a restricted frame executed as a plan fixe, positioned below eye level, and coupled with deep focus. This not only makes us uncomfortably aware of our position in space, it also puts us initially at a considerable distance from Juliette Binoche and her verbal assailant. In the second half of the scene this line-up is inverted, insofar as we are now too close, at once face to face and yet included through exclusion, while still aware of the other onlookers, once more in deep focus and thus acting as the deferred surrogates or mirror-images of our own position in the first half of the sequence.

Haneke is similarly purposive in his use of off-screen space, a dimension of the cinematic image that does indeed distinguish it from television, where one rarely if ever encounters off-screen space, at least not one that is not immediately retrieved as on-screen space through camera movement or the reaction shot.[20] More directly conducive to the experience of an ontological switch are the scenes where *on-screen space is reframed by sound-over*, for instance when in *Benny's Video* we see and hear for the second time Benny's parents discuss how to dispose of the girl's body, only to be startled into realizing that this time it is Benny and the policemen who are watching the footage, now as evidence for an indictment. This scene thus prepares the ground – or, more precisely, it prepares the groundless ground – for the opening scene in *Caché*, of which more below.

The typical effect of Haneke's manner of framing is thus to make us aware of a gap, to force us into a double take, or occasion a retrospective revision of our most basic assumptions.[21] The different ways of framing that I have just enumerated far too sketchily nonetheless make explicit the perceptual structure that holds us in place, palpably inscribing the viewer at the same time as it can mark his or her place as a non-space and a void, in contrast to the genre film (or television), which thanks to editing and camera movement covers over the fact that what we see is not "out there" (and we are invited to share it), but only exists because we are "in here" (and willing to pay for it – with our attention, our fascination, our guilt-relieving empathy). This covering over, or stitching of the spectator into the fiction, used to be known as suture theory, and thus Haneke might be a good case to amplify the argument most recently made by Slavoj Žižek, à propos Krzysztof Kieslowski, about the importance of the unsutured shot as a way of obliging us

to rethink the "ontology" of the cinema.[22] Going back into film history, one could argue that the famous misunderstandings between Bertolt Brecht and Fritz Lang when they worked together on *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943) revolved precisely around this point: Where Brecht sought to introduce distantiation effect of from the theater into Hollywood, the Hollywood veteran Lang wanted to work with reframing and retrospective revision, with the unsutured moment or the doubly sutured shot, in order to produce the even more unsettling effect of a world of move and counter-move, in which the overtly sadistic deceits of the Nazi regime could only be matched by the Czech Resistance with an even more skill-ful deployment of unframed or doubled illusionism: indeed, such ontological switches were the German director's acts of anti-Nazi the resistance.[23]

The Opening of *Caché*

An altogether extraordinary and exemplary moment of reframing in Haneke's work is the opening of *Caché*, which is worthy of precisely the grand master of the *mise-en-scène* of ontological voids and of wrongfooting the spectator that I have just introduced, namely, Fritz Lang. Haneke is able to accomplish this reframing without moving the camera, a particular feat, reframing first through off-screen sound and then by simultaneously reframing our perception of time, of space, and of medium, thanks first to the credits, mimicking the computer monitor, and then to the famous video scan-lines suddenly appearing in the image as it is fast-forwarded.

The opening of *Caché* is already in line to become one of the most commented-upon scenes in movie history, likely to take its place alongside the shower scene in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and the extended tracking shot from *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) as the very epitome of what cinema can do like no other art. And for similar reasons: By means that are specific, if not unique, to film – editing, camera movement, framing – each of these scenes induces a particular kind of vertigo which I have here called the *ontological switch*, typical of the mind-game film. With these references, one is not only able to give Haneke an impressive cinematic pedigree, but one also comes to regard him as one of those directors who helps us understand if not the true condition of cin-ema as a negative ontology, then certainly as one who pinpoints a significant development of the cinema in the new century, whether one thinks of it as "post-photographic" or not.

Among the literally hundreds of reviews of *Caché* on the Internet, all discuss the opening scene. Surprisingly many of them grasp one of the essential points of Haneke's reframing, namely, that it functions first on the temporal axis, by radically disturbing our sense of chronology and temporal hierarchies of past,

present, future, and even future anterior. Already in his earlier films, the articulation of time, and with it the different temporal registers inherent in the cinematic flow, was an important resource for Haneke. It generally took the form of proleptic or metaleptic shifts (that is, foreshadowing later or recalling earlier moments), rather than employing the more conventional tropes of flashbacks, interior monologue, or subjective time. As an example: The enigmatic final scene of *Caché* is made even more so by the possibility that it might be proleptic insofar as it might form a loop or Moebius strip with the film's opening, such that the ending of the film is in fact the beginning of the plot, in the sense of being chronologically prior to the beginning, even though shown at the end. In other words, Haneke leaves open the possibility that the scene between Pierrot and Majid's son may precede rather than follow the suicide and the dénouement. On the other hand, as we saw, metalepsis, that is, retrospective revision, is much more frequent, with just about every one of Haneke's films having a moment where framing and reframing wrongfoots us as to the time or place of what we thought we saw or recognized. Indeed, it is these moments of metalepsis that give his films their seeming power – appreciated as "uncanny" by some, rejected as manipulation or "cheating" by others – to invade the spectator's psychic and emotional life, in much the same way as his intruders invade the self-contented "happy families" of his films. In fact, the playing off of one medium against the other, or of "live" versus "recorded" action, discussed earlier as a kind of residual Brechtianism, can itself be reframed as significant mainly in respect of the almost imperceptible time shifts thereby effected. Their payoff is invariably small ontological shocks, as from a low-voltage cattle prod, achieved by what I now want to call Haneke's particular *metaleptic indexicality*, that is, the way he obliges the viewer to enter into a series of retrospective revisions that leave him or her suspended, unsettled, and ungrounded, yet powerfully aware of his or her physical presence in the here-and-now of the moment of viewing.

By refusing the reverse-shot in *Caché*'s opening, Haneke not only inhibits "suture," or the binding of the spectator into the diegesis, he also introduces as part of his narrative space that ontological no-go area, namely, the space *in front*, first theorized by Noël Burch in the 1970s and occasionally exploited by avant-garde filmmakers.[24] This space in front is not what is in front of the camera, the pro-filmic space, but rather the space in front of the screen, the space in front of the image, but also part of the image – if such a space is conceivable. It is usually elided in feature films (at least those of the classical period: in Griffith and early cinema it is very much present, and fully signifying, for instance in the famous "breadline" scene in *A Corner in Wheat* [1909] or in *An Unseen Enemy* [1912]). Said to undermine or suspend the status of external referentiality, this space in front becomes crucial whenever a director (Lang, Hitchcock, Welles, Buñuel, or Polanski are obvious examples) puts the world of reference under erasure in order to either

make the spectator fall into the ontological void, or to direct our attention else-where, usually at ourselves.[25]

Gaming: The Loop of Necessity

The attention that Haneke directs elsewhere is, as just argued, in the first instance to us, the spectators, making us hyperconscious not only of our physical here-and-now, but (in Hitchcock–Lang fashion) also of our position as watchers being watched, watching: watched by the very same instance, in *Caché*, that stalks the protagonists in the film and delivers the tapes. That such a tightening spiral of spectatorial self-reference has ethical repercussions as well as ontological impli-cations is demonstrated by a perspicacious comment from Steven Shaviro:

> What's most powerful about *Caché* is that it not only decrees guilt, but cranks the guilt up to a self-reflexive level: the guilt is reduced or managed by the flattery and privilege that we retain while observing all this; but such a meta-understanding itself creates a new, higher-order sense of guilt, which in turn is cushioned by a new, higher-order sense of self-congratulation as to our superior insight, which in turn is an unquestioned privilege that, when comprehended, leads to a yet-higher-level meta-sense of guilt, and so on ad infinitum. There's complete blockage, no escape from this unending cycle. The experience of the film is one both of self-disgust and of a liberation, through aestheticization, from this self-disgust.[26]

In Shaviro's description, a closed loop of guilt and insight into the guilt opens up, with neither producing the kind of understanding that might lead to action. It is similar to the loop I have characterized as "ontological," where each time a possible ground for reference appears, it is pulled from under us, to open up another gap, and to reveal the groundlessness of cinema's mode of viewing the world. *Caché* would thus also instantiate what I have argued is Haneke's first level of performa-tive self-contradiction, namely, the fallacy that seeing can lead to knowing and knowing to action. *Caché*, in other words, continues the auto-critique I claimed was present in *Code Unknown*, making self-contradiction the very resource of Haneke's film philosophy, as it were, and yet another sign that Haneke is aware of the pro-ductive double bind at the heart of his work. Corresponding to what Shaviro calls the oscillation between self-disgust and liberation on the part of the spectator are, perhaps, on the part of the director not so much his well-known sadism, but instead a tragic insight that helps renew his intellectual and creative energies. It may even give us a glimpse of the ecstatic side – the moments of *jouissance* – sustaining Haneke's apparently irredeemably gloomy world view. Put differently: God is near-est when all exits are blocked, when the trap is sprung and shut tight, and only a Pascalian wager or leap of faith can rescue the fallen soul.

Game Control, Remote Control

The idea of a wager, but also the mention of God, brings me to the other aspect of what I have called Haneke's performative self-contradiction, namely, the sense I have in his films of a control freak playing games with contingency and chance. The question that all his films raise, implicitly in some, but most often quite explicitly, is: Who plays with whom, by what means, and who is in control?

Put in a nutshell, one could say that those entities playing God in Haneke tend to extend the scope of their control the further they remove themselves from the scene. In *Benny's Video*, it is Benny who wants to be master over life and death but who in the end hands himself and his parents over to another authority; in *Funny Games*, the young men may be playing God, but they claim to be controlled, or rather, remote-controlled, by us as spectators, creating the diabolical loop of agency that is meant to produce in us the spiral of voyeurism and guilt, desire and its disavowal, which Shaviro has pinpointed in *Caché*. In *Code Unknown*, it is the invisible but audible director of the film-within-the film who so uncomfortably morphs in and out of the film we are watching, while in *Caché* there is not even a voice: the ubiquitous, omniscient, omnipresent God of the tapes – at once remote and "outside," yet totally "inside" as well.

Furthermore, in *Caché*, the kind of zero-degree of "groundlessness," the sort of void in the cinematic system of representation that yawns before us, is such that, once we have recovered from the shock, we are invited to try and "fill in," mainly thanks to the thriller narrative, providing us with an epistemic bait, the identity of the stalker and his motives. However, by the same token, it makes the historical referent, namely, the colonial legacy, and its purported ideological referent, latent racism, or bourgeois guilt and complacency, no more than that: also a bait, and thus, quite logically, something that can turn out to be merely a hook. On the other hand, there may also be another, equally specific historical inscription, which relates not to France but to Germany, and to Haneke's generation, preoccupied as it was – and still is – with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. For proof of such a link, one needs not only to look more closely at the notion of the director as God, but also to ask oneself in what sense this God is obsessively playing games with contingency and chance, and why.

Chronology of Contingencies: A Historical Trauma

One of the most remarkable things about *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* (*71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*) is surely its title – which seems not so much a title as a program, a motto, albeit one to which Haneke is dedicating his creative life. *Eine Chronologie des Zufalls* – a chronology of chance – seems a fitting oxymoron

by which to advertise another layer of the performative self-contradiction I have been trying to track, because how can chronology – the ordered sequence of temporal succession – be reconciled or made compatible with *Zufall*, signifying accident, collision, or chance encounter – the very epitome of randomness and contingency?

In the film of this title, for instance, the fixed camera positions in the "fragments" have nothing accidental/coincidental about them. Their selection and angles, as well as the length of the scenes, are all (pre)determined by the director, as is the predetermined outcome of all these mosaic pieces, which we learn from the first intertitles. The film may purport to be about chance, but it is the chance of a jigsaw puzzle, which can be laid out and assembled in only one way if it is to yield one particular "image."

On the other hand, one can easily see the chronology of contingency as offering a modality of both "control" and "chance," a way out of random senselessness and predestination, a condition of freedom, if you like, and with it the possibility that it might also be otherwise. A small scene in *71 Fragments* beautifully indicates this point in time and space of forking paths, of the moment when things could have gone the other way. This is the game of pick-up sticks between the ping pong-practicing student and his computer software friend. They are just taking time out after having successfully programmed the solution to a Rubic cube-type puzzle that has been played at various points earlier, and which necessitated a kind of "Gestalt-switch" in order to be correctly solved. The unstated implication is that at this "game" (of pick-up sticks), the student might have lost the newly acquired gun to his friend, and would thus have been prevented from using it when his nerves snapped in the bank.

Fig. 1.1   The pick-up sticks game. *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (**1994**)**, dir. Michael Haneke, prod. Veit Heiduschka.**

A more directly historical reference comes into view, however, if one compares Haneke's chronology of contingency with a famous saying by another German director, Alexander Kluge: "Tausend Zufälle, die im Nachhinein Schicksal heissen" ("a thousand coincidences that afterwards, in retrospect, are called 'fate'"),[27] a phrase which in Kluge functions as an answer to the always present, if implicitly stated, question, "How could it have come to this?," where "this" invariably stands for the German disaster of the Nazi regime, World War II, and the Holocaust. *71 Fragments* purports to be about a different "this," but it, too, poses the same question.

The question posed to us, the (re)viewers, must be something like this: If it is possible, indeed inevitable, to read Haneke's early films also against this obsessional foil of German political and cultural debates of the 1960s and 1970s, then the so-called glaciation films must also be seen as answers to this key generational question. They would be the sort of retroactive effect – that is, in a series of metaleptic slippages – of the hypothetical cause: How small steps of frustration, anger, envy, and humiliation can bring people – a people – to give themselves (to "outsource" themselves to) a fascist *Ubervater* and malevolent God. *71 Fragments* can be read within such a set of presuppositions, as can *Benny's Video*. Performative self-contradiction would then be Haneke's very personal way of bearing the burden of his generation, as well as of his country of birth, to which he belongs, no matter how far he has moved, whether geographically or in his films' subject matter.

This line of interpretation would also help place in a more layered, but also more historically determinate context another recurring feature of Haneke's films: the tendency to play with the possibility of rewinding the film of the characters' lives. While these scenes, for example in *Benny's Video* and *Funny Games*, are usually interpreted as yet more instances of meta-cinematic reflexivity, they could be read, when seen against the backdrop of what I have elsewhere called the temporality of regret typical of the New German Cinema, also as attempts, however doomed or derided, to undo what we know cannot be reversed, even if this had been the result of a concatenation of circumstances and accidents. Brigitte Peucker hints at such a possibility when commenting on Benny's obsessive replay of his video: "Necrophilic fascination may be one explanation for his behavior, but another aim is the control of narrative flow and time: he manipulates this footage in order – half-seriously – to interfere with the inevitability of its narrative and to reverse 'reality.'"[28] In light of such an impossible, but also impossibly fraught, desire, punished in *Funny Games*, obliquely endorsed in *Benny's Video*, the fast-forward in *Caché* also assumes a further layer, giving what I have called Haneke's metaleptic moments their special ethical charge.

Gaming: Play

How does any of this relate to that other idea of game, also present in Haneke, and which I argued might provide a way out of the epistemological fallacy, as well

as untying the performative self-contradictions, however much they might pro-vide moments of *jouissance* to the director and moments of frisson and thrill to his audiences?

Here, I need to appeal to the special status of games, namely, that they constitute a contract between two or more parties, freely entered into of one's own accord, but, once agreed to, rules apply that cannot be renegotiated or arbitrarily changed. A game is also open-ended – otherwise it is rigged – but nonetheless obliges one to stick to the rules, and these are predetermined. Games in this sense are thus parables of the intertwining of free will and determinism, and at the limit performative – indeed addictive – double binds or self-contradictions.

This is one level at which the game metaphor is operative and instantiated in Haneke's work, and where, as we saw, the frame sets the rules, regulating dis-tance and proximity, and thus conceiving of the world in terms of subject–object relations, so that to enter is to hand over one's freedom to someone determined to exercise control, to the point of turning the viewing subject into the object. Yet there is another level, where gaming introduces a different set of terms, and may indeed propose a different paradigm altogether. In a discussion of *Funny Games*, Roy Grundmann details several levels of the game that the boys are playing with the family. It is the last one that concerns me here: "Their ultimate rationale is found on the third level of the game, the film's explicit, perversely playful acknow-ledgment that these 'funny games' are enacted only because there's an audience for them – us viewers."[29]

Again, my suggestion would be to see this not only as proof of reflexivity and a meta-level self-reference, but also as an indication that the idea of play here involves a particular kind of contract: If, as Grundmann's third level suggests, the relevant level of referentiality is the film performance, the film experience, the film fact, then each film must propose to the spectator the set of rules by which it wants to be "played". This pragmatic – or semio-pragmatic – perspective is implicitly present in every Hollywood film, which in its opening scenes, and often already in its credits, provides the viewer with a kind of instruction manual, a sometimes more, sometimes less easily decodable set of clues as to the type of contract it intends to honor. European cinema is less overt about this, insofar as it is usually a matter of the director speaking to the audience across his or her characters. In the case of Haneke, as indeed with other directors of what I have called "mind-game films," this direct voice has increasingly taken the form of a game between the director and the audience. Haneke's acknowledged mastery lies in the way he manages to combine stern control over his mind games, while only indirectly revealing himself to either his characters or the audience. Yet there are glimpses and moments – at the margins of these parables – also of another form of game, one more in line with what I have called a pragmatic view, but which also brings me back to the "ontological" view of the cinema, as outlined by Alain Badiou in an earlier passage. This would imply that the director does not so much play the sadistic God as one who is as concerned as we, the spectators, are with "that, which

from being, gives itself to thought as deception of vision" (Badiou), or who can come to terms with the paradox that "the lie of the image is the truth of our world" (Jean-Luc Nancy). It would mean attempting to engage with the world, via the cinema, and thus to enter into a different kind of wager or "game," now, as it were, on the far side of predetermined rules or control.

I have found at least three moments in Haneke's films that intimate what such a different game might signify. One refers to a diegetic moment, in *Benny's Video*, which Brigitte Peucker describes in terms of a kind of epiphany, and which precedes Benny's handing over of the tape to the police. Benny and his mother are on holiday in Egypt, without the father, who meanwhile has to dispose of the murdered girl's body. At a time of utter tragedy, guilt, moral squalor, and impending disaster, the two of them, each armed with a video camera, seem to be experiencing a time out of time, a deeply resonant moment of freedom, at once a pre-Oedipal fusion of the mother–child dyad and the utopian moment of art and creativity – made possible because of the cameras, rather than (as one would expect) in spite of them. It is as if the very instrument of Benny's alienation – the video camera – is here enlisted to exorcise the damage it has done.

My second example is the school entrance scene at the end of *Caché*. Whether we decide to place it chronologically at the end or at the beginning of the plot, or whatever we think its significance might be, the scene – filmed as a static long shot and held for what seems like an eternity – requires us to enter into a game of open-ended surmise. Given that we are too remote to hear what is being said and the composition is too flat and distributive for us to know exactly where to focus our attention, this lack of focus becomes the very point of the scene: It functions as a form of invitation to change our mode of perception, to begin to "read" flatness, instead of depth, and thus to rely not solely on the ocular-centric perspectivism of classical representation.

My final example is one that is both diegetically relevant and requires our active inclusion as the audience: I am referring to the framing scenes of *Code Unknown*, where at the end the mute children still play their game, and they persist in playing, offering "a pre-verbal state of pure, ecstatic communion/communication using the sound and rhythms of tribalistic drums." In a code that remains "unknown" to most of us, they thus extend an invitation, an opening up, whereas Anne, changing the code on her front door to stop Georges from gaining entry, seems to shut herself in. The next generation, whatever their handicap, the film seems to say, is still capable of playing the game of communication, however fraught it is with misunderstanding or plain incomprehension. And because no subtitles are provided, we too have to enter into the game in order to be present and to participate. As one commentator put it: "These bookend deaf children frame the film and seem to say that the consequences of Babel are artistry and ingenuity, not silence and despair."[30]

Playing the game before knowing the rules is no doubt a risky undertaking, but in certain circumstances this might be the necessity that gives us a measure

of freedom. If Haneke's films have, from the beginning, proclaimed that there is no outside to the inside of the mediatized world, then "the lie of the image" and "deceptive vision" can only be redeemed once we can also understand "the truth of our world" as the game we all are obliged to play, even if none yet knows the code. Beyond performative self-contradiction, this ontological choice is our challenge, but also our chance – now in both senses of the word, and I trust this is also the way Haneke understands it to be understood.

Notes

1   Haneke's ambivalences of the ocular-centric view of cinema are touched upon in Karl Suppan (1996).
2   See, for instance, Mattias Frey (2003).
3   The first collection of auteurist essays on Haneke was *Michael Haneke und seine Filme*, edited by Alexander Horwath (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1991).
4   For a sample of the director's blend of Aristotelian aesthetics and Brechtian politics, see Michael Haneke (1992).
5   Thomas Elsaesser (2005).
6   Other European directors who are brought up in one Christian religion but tend to the values of other ones are Krzysztof Kieslowski, Jacques Rivette, Lars von Trier, and Tom Tykwer.
7   On K. O. Apel's performative self-contradictions, see Matthias Kettner (1993).
8   For an attempt at a Deleuzian reading of Haneke, see Mattias Frey (2002).
9   Georges Didi-Huberman, paraphrasing Jean-Luc Nancy, in a lecture in Amsterdam, March 10, 2005. Didi-Huberman was referring to a passage from *The Ground of the Image*, where Nancy notes: "If truth is what lends itself to verification, then the image is unverifiable unless it is compared with an original, which one assumes it must resemble. But this assumption is a discourse that you will have introduced, to which the image gives no legitimacy. If truth is what is revealed or manifested from itself, it is not only the image that is always true, it is truth that is, of itself, always image (being in addition and simultaneously image of itself)." Jean-Luc Nancy, "Distinct Oscillation," *The Ground of the Image* (2005: 76–7).
10   Alain Badiou (2005: 129).
11   Thomas Elsaesser (2009).
12   For a good summary of Haneke's themes, see Christopher Sharrett (2004). (This interview is reprinted in this volume.)
13   See fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Haneke (accessed June 2007).
14   Robert Pfaller (2003) and Slavoj Žižek, "The Interpassive Subject."
15   Haneke often supplements the inner framing by an unexpected outer framing, to draw attention to this dynamic of exclusion and inclusion – via editing and the multiple boundaries and enframings it makes possible. An intriguing example of "exclusion through inclusion" occurs at one of the dinner parties in *Caché*, when the black woman guest is absent in her very un(re)marked presence and, as I recall, is almost as decoratively silent as a cigar store Indian.
16   See Thomas Elsaesser (2006).

17 "Code Unknown: An Auto-Dialogue."

18 Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, quoted in Gilles Deleuze (1992: 61).

19 Brigitte Peucker (2004) calls these compositions "Haneke's signature shots," although she associates them more with a meta-cinematic level of self-reference to the cinematic apparatus than with neo-realist deep-staging. I would argue that the reference to both neo-realism and the cinematic apparatus is apposite, however much this seems at first glance contradictory.

20 Examples of off-screen space not retrieved or sutured by a reverse shot occur famously in *Benny's Video*, when the girl is dying off-frame; in *Funny Games*, when the son is killed off-frame; and in *Code Unknown*, when the neighbors' child is physically abused and presumably killed.

21 This contrasts with, but is also complemented by, a *mise-en-scène* that – as in many horror films – maintains another kind of division, namely, that whereby the viewer is affectively sharing the emotional point of view of the victim, while the framing obliges him or her to share the point of view of the perpetrator, in short, the author of the misery or torment inflicted on the characters.

22 Slavoj Žižek (2001).

23 See Gerd Gemünden (1999).

24 Noël Burch (1981).

25 Evidently, such a scene, coming at the very opening, puts us on red alert as well as on our guard, drawing attention to the conditions of spectatorship, specifically in the cinema, but also perhaps more generally in the world itself – the world viewed, as we might paraphrase Cavell, who understood this as an ontological rather than an epistemological issue.

26 The Pinocchio Theory (Steven Shaviro), www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=476.

27 Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt (1981: 47).

28 Brigitte Peucker (2004).

29 Roy Grundmann (2007).

30 See theeveningclass.blogspot.com/2006/02/blogathon-no-2-michael-hanekes-code.html (accessed June 4, 2007).

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