

Review of Haneke's Hidden

Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (*Cache*) is an extraordinary film and yet one more step in an extraordinary career (*Code Unknown*, *The Piano Teacher*..) The story is simple: a bourgeois Parisian couple are increasingly rattled by tapes sent anonymously through the door. A hidden camera records their movements in and out of their apartment and inside a car headed towards a childhood manse. The Daniel Auteil character, Georges, is a successful semi-intellectual talk show host, his wife (played by Juliette Binoche) an overworked publishing professional. Slowly, the film reveals events locked in Georges' past, beginning with subliminal clips of a young Algerian boy covered in blood. Georges has a secret that has come back to haunt him..

The genius of the film lies in the unpanned extended shots taken through the hidden camera. One's first thought is of Rohmer, but the comparison would be wrong. This is not a film about the emotional vicissitudes of Gallic life. In the book-lined living space at the centre of the apartment, Georges and wife fast forward and rewind through the tapes, their cosy world of wine and successful friends stripped bare. When the tape is stopped, news footage from the Middle East and other anonymous tragedies play across the screen, a Shakespearean device to portray a cosmic backdrop of woe. Meanwhile, their pubescent son Pierrot seems to be falling into his own private hormonal hell.

Throughout the film, the taping camera sees but is not seen. We never actually find out who is behind the lens. This enigmatic structure creates a powerful multi-layered and open-ended cinematic metaphor. Let me try to unravel perhaps the first few layers.

The first layer is the hidden camera as a way of thinking about memory and what has passed. While Georges continues to see (and be seen on TV), he cannot see his own memory. In other words, the hidden camera functions as a trope for the occlusions of memory. Something in the past was recorded, but the memorial tape has only just been found. How many of the thousands of memories we carry round with us do we ever recall? Most lie in dust, in a far off corner of the mind's attic. But we can never be sure

when the weight of one of these memories will suddenly become heavy, and fall through the roof. Although we tend to think of our memories as assertions of our identity throughout time, memory can become sharp-edged, and tear at all our certainties. This film takes us there.

Secondly, the hidden camera in *Cache* at no point has a figure-behind-the lens. The contemporary world of CCTV, speed cameras, tracking devices, Google keywords and wireless mics is precisely this – a world where everyone is watched and yet no one is watching. We are forced to behave as if someone might always be tracking us: a peer-to-peer Panopticon has become the hallmark of our surveilled society. Although our world looks more or less the same as it did, beneath the earth, networks of seeing pulse at the speed of electricity, undermining our attempts at carefree anonymity. Someone is watching, but we cannot call it Big Brother anymore. Rather: ‘it’ is watching. And this anonymous it tears at the intimate fabric of daily life. Everything and nothing remains hidden.

Third, the Algerian narrative woven into the film is a personalisation of France’s dirty little secret. We are led to believe the unseen cameraman is Algerian (father? Son?) but are never allowed a moment of recognition. Even the memory itself, when finally revealed, is captured by an imaginary 3rd person, a ghost behind the lens, a witness made only of ectoplasm. In precisely analogous terms, France’s role in the dark night of the “Algerian Civil War” is kept hidden; all tapes are lost. Algerian suffering is not allowed to come to presence or become a form of witness. Instead, we are left with the quiet streets of upscale Paris; all traces of blood and drowned bodies long ago wiped from consciousness. Meanwhile, in a quiet room in the suburbs, a knife is drawn, and a throat’s blood is about to paint the wall a Pollock. Haneke uses history to nod towards the malaise of the present: those dreaded banlieux, where Arab lives are slowly wasted, the occasional flash of blood the only evidence.

To have created such a powerfully multivalent cinematic allegory from such a simple story is a work of genius.

