Narrative meanings and implicit themes in Haneke's film *Cache* (2005)

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Abstract

Throughout Haneke's film *Cache* (2005), there exists a plethora of deeper meanings and narrative themes. Haneke is known for his iconoclastic films that 'analyse the dysfunctional state of Western society' (Grundmann; 2010). In *Cache*, he focuses on the dark side of power, trauma, guilt and social memory that interacts with the bitterness of contemporary French consciousness (Frey; 2002). Haneke is interested in a range of philosophers, sociologists, poets and artists, especially noting his interest with theories from Baudrillard, Deleuze, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Plato. The 'simulacrum' (Mann; 2007) that represents the off-screen reality which will be compared to the cinematic space, along with the Deleuzian concept of 'abolishing the world of essences and the world of appearances' (Deleuze; 1983). Subsequently, the ideas of post-modern self (Denzin; 1991), themes of surveillance with Bentham's panopticon and consumerism will be distinguished through Haneke's influences. There will be connotations integrating with ideas from Marxism to modern cinema, in hope to seek the truth (Plato; 380 BC) through his use of frames and images (Baudrillard) that reflect a postmodern society.

The first scene (opening credits) of *Cache* depicts a taped sequence, a voyeuristic perspective in a deep focus (Orson Welles) and a long take: this is Haneke's cinematographic style of 'presenting diegetic events as overtly staged and modelled in order to connect them to real social issues' (Niessen; 2009), which is played over on our screen as well as on Georges' TV shortly after. Its surveillance signature is established through the next shots when Georges rewinds the tape. The audience does not see Georges with the remote control, therefore the connotations suggest he is not in control of the tapes, but we discover it's a taped sequence when the 'ripples' appear across the first image (Grundmann; 2010; p83). The credits on the opening scene also establish the role of the spectator as Haneke's victims, much like prisoners in Bentham's Panopticon: connotations of our perceptions are under the guards' (Haneke's) control. We are under surveillance as much as the characters are from the beginning of the film. This gives the audience a clue that Haneke himself, and the rest of the film crew (their names written on the taped sequence) were the ones who sent the tapes to Georges at the opening credits, where the static street camera was possibly on a tripod. In one of Haneke's interviews (Boehm; 2009), Haneke says that 'you should make visible the dramatic tricks you use', a statement which emphasises the power of images. This is emphasised later when Georges and Anne are investigating the tapes, when Georges says "How did I manage to miss this guy? I can't figure it out... it doesn't look filmed through a window.", and Anne replies with,

"Maybe the camera was in the car... someplace in that house maybe?"

With these assumptions in mind, Haneke causes the audience to undergo an experience comparable to that of the characters. It is a critique of cinematic space and the audience's consumption of media, simulations of reality which are not any more or less "real" than the reality they simulate (Mann; 2007). In this postmodern society, Baudrillard declares that our post-modern self takes 'maps' of reality such as film watching or media consumption as more real than our actual lives, these 'simulacra' (hyperreal replicas) precede our lives. We, like the characters, are on a journey of surveillance with the evidence of Haneke stating 'you didn't understand the film' if you concentrated on the 'whodunit' complex, which we ought not to because we are reduced to passivity as spectators. Another scene that connects to the previous

point is the scene in which a camera shadow is shown when Georges parks his car outside his apartment, the same shot as in the opening credits is used, but this time the headlights are on, thus creating a shadow—yet the protagonist (a fictional character) does not notice the camera when he walks back to his apartment. This is fixated because Haneke is taking advantage of his role as a film maker, displaying the power of images and its deception.

The Panopticon is the 18th century version of Plato's allegory of the cave. Haneke leads our minds towards this realm of surveillance, 'an invasive gaze of modern panopticism' (Parker and Sinclair; 2011; p227) where the film begins with a wide shot (Jean Renoir), a simulacrum of the cinematic space which goes on with the idea of 'simulation' in mind that slowly ends with another wide shot of students waiting outside the steps of Lycee Stéphane Mallarmé (Grundmann; 2010; p75). *Cache* ends as it started. (Niessen; 2009) Each wide shot is held for much longer than the viewer anticipates. This device is not traditionally used to establish place, technique or orientation, but goes on to establish where the audience is situated. We concentrate and expect the frame to cut at any moment, but it just holds on longer, a neo-realist film technique which would cause the post-modern spectator to feel a sense of unease. Relating this idea to Plato's cave, if *Cache* (2005) was the shadows, the prisoners (spectators) are not offered any shadows (deceptions) by the architects (Haneke). This also relates to Bentham's Panopticon: the audience are the prisoners and the guard isn't allowing any light (the outside world) to be seen by the prisoners.

Haneke's wide shots eventually lead us towards a blank consciousness; he says in an interview that it is more powerful if 'the spectator [imagines] with his own fantasy' (Haneke; 2009)—liberating us prisoners, allowing us to have our own interpretations, our thoughts on hold as well as the image being on hold. The cinematic apparatus can successfully deceive, manipulate and subject to 'brainwashing'. However, it could also be celebrated as a new art form, a new model for engineering perceptions, 'a state of liberated active consciousness of critical awareness' (Wheatley, 2009, p35) allowing us space to observe where the 'action' shot is, as we gaze to find meaning within Haneke's deployment of the cinematic frame (Grundmann; 2010; p61). While the anxiety settles, Haneke's wide shot is a distinctive visual

style which delivers and disenthralls the cinematic experience, deconstructs the filmic medium. The spectator earns their understanding of the film through active participation rather than being reduced to passivity. We are gazing at an audience that could be us waiting outside the school instead of the characters (Niessen; 2009). It maps out a variety of filmic dimensions in which we could place ourselves in different positions within the Panopticon, within Plato's cave, within the cinema, with the given choice of being the guard, the architect or the prisoners; the camera could be rolling behind us or in front of us. From the beginning and towards the end, each frame and image engages spectators as a voyeur, a 'guilty subject and a co-investigator' which is a theme that is critical within *Cache*.

During the wine party scene in which we see a man talking about Baudrillard, immediately people who are familiar with the French sociologist would be reminded of the idea of a postmodern society. Anne's house, surrounded by books, is an illusory construct; she has all the 'knowledge' with the books, yet she surrenders to Georges' fascination of the mysterious tapes. This contradiction is also shown with the way her son is brought up, Pierrot's accusation of her having an affair and her postmodern self psychologically traumatises her child as well. The hyperreality that immerses the audience within the film has transformed to such a degree that it no longer represents reality in any meaningful way, which is a message from Haneke about a post-modern society being an illusory construct. Haneke also shows this element of deception between the character's simulated world and reality when Georges goes to the cinema (escape from reality) to suppress the encounter of Majid committing suicide. This is followed up by shots of Georges taking some sleeping pills and going to bed in the dark which represents the emptiness of postmodernism. Haneke deconstructs postmodernism and states:

"If you think it's Majid, Pierrot, Georges, the malevolent director, God himself, the human conscience - all these answers are correct."- Haneke

The word 'God' was used to signify consumers who worship images and simulation like deities which are a higher level of deception that is supported by the Fourth Estate, some governments and media institutions. According to Baudrillard's essay, 'The Precession of Simulacra' (1981), he approved the way iconoclasts support postmodern 'aniconism' (Bland;

2000; p44-45): they believe in the destruction of images, especially images of any god "because the divinity which animates nature can never be represented". There are consequences when this happens, it is used as an advantage by people in power such as governments, which enslaves the spectator and the characters in the film such as Georges and Anne with the tapes. It is a criticism of how people easily believe in images without any evidence. This ideology is emphasised during the scene with Georges asking the police to arrest Majid and Majid's son because he had the power to do so (bourgeois society) and to suppress his post-colonial guilt. Iconoclasts predicted 'the omnipotence of simulacra,' and feared images based on the knowledge that "deep down God never existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum."

Baudrillard suggests that the simulacra create connotations out of denotations, blurring the boundary between truth and falsity, (Park; 2011) which relates to Georges' post-colonial guilt due to which he tries to repress the reality of what he did in the past to Majid. The foreigners symbolise the oppressed, representing the 200 Algerian protestors in 1962 that were murdered by the Parisian police with orders from one Maurice Papon during the Nazi occupation of France, and their bodies dumped into the Seine. It was never reported even though France had a liberal press. Social memories of the Franco-Algerian war were for several years profoundly repressed, reflecting the immense trauma, shame and bitterness of the French government. Millions of soldiers, immigrants and people today in French society have fought in, suffered or lived through the conflict (McCormack, Jo; 2011). The divergence lasted about eight years and was a violently fought campaign that triggered a huge division amongst people in today's France. Memory activists such as Philippe Bernard and Yamina Benguigui believed in the importance of working through the past memories of the Algerian War, and that it is 'essential to the process of integrating ethnic minorities' as well as to the understanding of contemporary French consciousness (McCormack, Jo; 2011).

Haneke presents us with the denotation of Georges' personal guilt and enlightens us with a broader theme with connotations of post-colonial guilt through a few incidents such as Georges' display of racial discrimination with the African man on a bicycle. The ignorant

attitude is repeated during the meeting with Majid's son at the television studio, these repeated patterns in the film reflect the ignorance and tyranny of Georges, Anne and Georges' privileged group of friends, a connotation of the French bourgeois. The connotations of expensive wine, group dinners with jokes referencing 1962 Algerian murders, and the wine party scene with the man talking about a subject of 'cinematic space' inside *Hidden's* cinematic space itself. It has connotations of postmodern lies everywhere, the endless piles of books that cover majority of the walls that are eerily organised and neat. It raises questions for the spectator such as "What is behind those books?", it represents the space between reality and fiction. All these objects including books having connotations of knowledge and wine having connotations of power, these connotations separate the bourgeois from the oppressed foreigners; this is also shown with Majid's small apartment and Georges' big house. These foreigners (Majid the Algerian, Majid's son and the African man on the bicycle) are cast in the Marxist role of the proletariat avenging the past; they are the return of the repressed, a post-colonial anxiety caused by the poor treatment of foreigners by the haut monde. The rewinding of tapes is a reminder (rewinding) of the crimes committed by the bourgeoisie and it represents the vengeance of Georges' crimes; his repressed shame is seen throughout the whole film. In the most abstract sense, the cultural logic of late capitalism defines the postmodern moment (Jameson; 1991). The child's drawing of a cartoon with a bloody mouth connected with the shot of the 'bloody mouthed boy' (Grundmann; 2010; p81) establishes a psychologised point of view; it is this realisation of connecting different moments of the film and looking past the aesthetics that diminishes the importance of direct denotation and invoking connotations, which are the deeper meanings.

Haneke chose 'Lycee Stéphane Mallarmé' as the name of Pierott's school, this is significant because Stéphane Mallarmé was a poet 'that [broke] all ties with the human experience to become the experimental literature...the complexity of the construction and the scarcity of vocabulary (used in its etymological sense more than its current meaning), that in order to engage in the sacred darkness of a poem that can illuminate' (Marchal and Bonnefoy;1945). It could be said that Haneke is a film poet who has a style that encompasses staged realism (Niessen; 2009; p181), and has an interest in the etymology of film language

which pertain to pure images (true continuity) advocated by André Bazin. Haneke is a film activist concerned with the human condition, with all these influences intact in order to illuminate a postmodern society. According to Felix Boehm (2009)'s interview, Haneke declares that 'you should not lie with images or manipulate for that matter' which refers to Baudrillard's statement of violence with images: 'in order for the meaning, for the message to affect us, the image has to exist on its own, to impose its original language'. The words 'original language' highlight the etymological sense of Haneke's work. Haneke goes on to say that the ideal film scene is one that a spectator cannot stand, which explains the element of obscenity in most of his films, a technique Haneke uses to liberate spectators. This leads to the statement of spectators or film-thinkers surrendering to what we see or hear; the spectator is trapped in Baudrillard's simulacra or within the Panopticon, and instead they are reduced to passivity. *Cache* allows us to see what is happening offset and outside the frames of the Hidden world, which is not so hidden after all, it was always there but because of our ignorant viewing habits, we are blurred by icons, the media and the simulacra. In this Hidden world, the spectator could focus on the off-screen space, its connotations and an iconoclastic view of postmodern society— which mainstream cinema lacks. *Cache* criticises human nature as heading towards a skewed direction of civilisation, distraught over greed, disillusioned over crimes and distressed over war. The tyrannical and the animalistic disposition still encircles the world, in this case, the French bourgeois society.

At this postmodern age, Haneke's ideologies define a real scope of human ingenuity, courage and eagerness to overcome problems of hatred, prejudice and fear. His work is a criticism of the post modern self, being the spectator conforming to the illusory constructs such as the mass media. Haneke shows us the power, depth and impact of images which contains structures of control that lead to public brainwashing that are supported by media institutions. He provides the deepest and darkest aspects of the unconscious, the Hiddenness which reveal the result of post-colonial repression and the aftermath of the people who suffered the traumas. Considering 1962 France's Liberal Press, they supported murder, racial discrimination and division of social classes. Yet, after all the violence that was caused, Georges representing the bourgeoisie is still ignorant to what he had done to a defenceless Algerian boy (Majid).

Michael Haneke's ideas are as outdated as Mark Twain's last novel Mysterious Stranger (1916), a serious social commentary on the Moral Sense and the 'damned human race'. Much like the Panoptical (though in different ways) societies depicted in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and Huxley's Brave New World, the ideologies discussed determine the final revolution which would brainwash all societies, reduce all people to passivity and egotism, and take away all liberty, leaving all people lifeless mechanisms in love with their own servitude. The truth is drowned by the mass irrelevancies of the mass media, which, as depicted in *Cache*, drowns out the crimes of the bourgeoisie and causes all people to surrender their identities to cultural imperialism, reducing the postmodern self to mindless cyborgs.

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