Exasperating Miscommunications: The Cold Europe in Michael Haneke's Films

Janina Falkowska
The University of Western Ontario

Michael Haneke's films are universally hailed as provocative, brilliant, and disturbing. They challenge dominant cinema, which promises entertainment but actually delivers only escapism and distraction. They are disturbing because he deconstructs genre expectations, breaks taboos, and sharpens our feelings and responses to the world around us. The paranoia of Haneke's protagonists exemplifies the general mistrust and anxiety prevalent not only in affluent and comfortable Western societies in general, but also in Austria, which has its own baggage of frustration and uncertainty resulting from migratory and social changes affecting the whole of Europe. The themes present in Haneke's films—paranoia, hybridization, and a dialogue between the external and the internal—translate into the Kafkaization of Haneke's whole film production. The filmmaker himself admits to the strong influence of Kafka in his films.

Born in Czechoslovakia, Kafka wrote his greatest novels and short stories in his native country and in Austria and is considered one of the most important of European writers, one who appropriately expressed the phobias and uncertainties of the people inhabiting central Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. He articulates feelings of loneliness, frustration, and alienation, as well as a profound perception of human imperfection. He also depicts the oppressive guilt of an individual threatened by anonymous forces beyond his comprehension or control. In his works *The Trial* (1914), "The Metamorphosis" (1915), and *The Castle* (1922), for instance, Kafka conveys surrealistically the lack of understanding among people, their sense of solitude, and, as a result, the deep-set need to create one's own inner life, carefully guarded against the unknown dangers lurking in the external world. Similarly, in Haneke's films, claustrophobia and fear are revealed in the acts of unexplained horror, illogi-

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL SEPTEMBER 2007 SEPTEMBRE RCLC
0319-051X/07/34.3/329

cal actions on behalf of the protagonists, phobias, and paranoia. Like Kafka's works, Haneke's films are realistic but also dreamlike, startling spectators with their intensity of vision and disturbing motifs. In their sparse detail, economy of dialogue, and cold lighting, they convey to the spectators a profound sense of the filmmaker's preoccupations with the state of mind of contemporary Europeans. Already in his early films, *Benny's Video* (1992), *The Rebellion* (1993), and *71 Fragments* (1994), Haneke's disturbing themes are clearly present.

In *Benny's Video,* a young man kills a school friend without any reason. In fact, he is really interested in how pigs are slaughtered and applies the same method to the girl. He electrocutes the girl, but the act of murder is hidden from the spectator, only to be revealed later on a VCR tape accidentally discovered by the boy's parents. Benny has videotaped the murder, fascinated by the act itself, never really pondering its moral and ethical consequences. The terrified parents slowly absorb the enormity of this deed, yet they do not report their son or the missing girl to the police. The whole family lives in a horrific dream, suspended in a Kafkaesque un-reality where ethical and moral responsibilities for such atrocious deeds never materialize. Only once does the mother wake up from this dream when she bursts into abrupt crying during a vacation with Benny. When mother and son return home, however, they continue their lives as if nothing had happened. The horrific dream never ends, and there is no moral explication for the spectator. Horror is not communicated verbally or explained visually in any way, let alone confessed, nor is the deed forgiven. The lack of communication and of any admission of guilt translates into an absence of any feelings of sorrow—or rather, these feelings are hidden so deeply that they never materialize. They carry on with their lives behind a façade of superficial appropriateness and compliance with the conventional rules of society.

Similarly, in the traditionally shot *The Rebellion,* based on Joseph Roth's book of the same title (1926), Andreas Pum, the WW1 vet, never really communicates his outrage concerning WW1, nor his humiliation upon his stay in prison where he was put for no apparent reason. Silence is communicated by the gray and brown film colour palette and through tableaux-like scenes portraying happy but quiet moments with the war widow and her daughter; this later turns into deadly silence when Pum is called a Bolshevik on the tram, reacts angrily to this accusation, and ends up at the police station. This grim tale of the unjustly imprisoned war vet nevertheless conveys the utter despair of a man unable to express his outrage, unable to defend himself or to fight for his rights. When he finally leaves the prison, Pum is further humiliated by a wife who no longer wants him back. He dies lying on the pavement, unable to get up, hearing in his mind the sounds of the music box he had played so many times in his earlier life (before prison). Although in some ways a typical historical drama with documentary footage from WW1, *The Rebellion* speaks volumes about loneliness and despair in general, themes too overwhelming to be communicated in words. Unlike

Benny's Video and the following *71 Fragments,* this film ends on a surprisingly positive (or at least bittersweet) note, however, for Pum dies happy, to the sound of his beloved music.

No positive emotion is accorded the spectator of *71 Fragments,* a film telling the concurrent and intersecting stories of several people, all of them lonely and desperate for human contact. A childless couple yearns to have a child, but when they take a young Austrian girl for adoption, she refuses completely to communicate with them and clings frantically to a bright winter jacket instead. In another arc, an older man seeks contact with his estranged daughter who works at a bank; in order to talk to her, he stands in line at the bank where she works. She reluctantly listens to his complaints while other customers stand in line behind him. Elsewhere, a young man obsessively plays table tennis. He does not talk about his personal problems with his friend, and at the end of the film he goes to a gas station where he shoots at passing strangers and then kills himself.

71 Fragments is a brutal and dispassionate film interspersed with news clips showing massacres and wars. The real victim is a lonely Turkish boy who has entered Austria illegally. Just as he made the first contact with the woman yearning children, he is left alone again when she is accidentally killed by the young gunman. Not only doesn't he find refuge in Austria, but neither can he find refuge in communication. The woman was the only one who accepted him and tried to explain German words to him. As Robin Wood explains in his shrewd analysis of Haneke's film *Code Inconnu,* yet in words that apply equally to Haneke's other films as well, Haneke communicates "a sense of despair with our civilization, its future, and ultimately with the human race itself" (Wood 41).

The same despair was communicated by Franz Kafka in his famous *Der Schloss (The Castle),* which Haneke brilliantly adapted for film in 1997. In Haneke's adaptation, the action of *Der Schloss* occurs in a contemporary setting, somewhere in rural Austria, with its typical provincial houses and *knajpas* (cheap restaurants). It shows people in contemporary clothes, Austrian *Bauer* (peasants) conducting surrealistic dialogues in the realistic interiors of a small Austrian village. Haneke convincingly creates a realistic space in which people communicate only superficially. The mysterious "incommunicado" makes dialogue possible, but real contact impossible. Haneke's *The Castle* appropriately depicts Kafka's traits but also speaks of the loneliness and hopelessness of the contemporary civilized world. These particular traits of Kafka's oeuvre appear in all Haneke's films, but perhaps most especially in his three most famous works, *Funny Games* (1997), *The Piano Teacher* (2001), and *Code Innconu* (2000). No longer secure in their homes (*Funny Games*) or in their minds (*The Piano Teacher, Code Innconu*), the protagonists in these films drift thoughtlessly through the streets of great cities, lost in selfish thoughts and a complex disseverance from their fellow citizens.

In an interview for the Austrian Film Commission, Haneke stated that it is language or the difficulties involved in communication in the contemporary world that

especially interest him. Questioning of the status quo, media manipulation, ever-present violence, xenophobia, and contemporary society's obsession with sex are themes that appear in all his films, but most notably in the three noted above (and further discussed below). These films can be discussed from various perspectives: as important film texts commenting on the state of contemporary European society, as texts challenging the traditional form of film via their bold subversions, or as meta-critical comments on the acts of communication themselves.

The act of communication was theorized convincingly by John R. Searle in 1962. John Austin describes the notion of speech acts in the following way:

> To communicate is to express a certain attitude, and the type of speech act being performed corresponds to the type of attitude being expressed. For example, a statement expresses a belief, a request expresses a desire, and an apology expresses a regret. As an act of communication, a speech act succeeds if the audience identifies, in accordance with the speaker's intention, the attitude being expressed…. (qtd in Bach)

Austin identifies three distinct levels of action beyond the act of utterance itself. He distinguishes (i) the act of saying something, (ii) what one does in saying it, and (iii) what one does by saying it; he calls these "locutionary," "illocutionary," and "perlocutionary" acts, respectively (Bach). The speech act framework is especially useful in analyzing Haneke's films. As films questioning the very ideas of communication, they also function metacritically as singular speech acts with their own locution, illocution, and perlocution. Moreover, the films as texts are comprised of multiple fragments, each functioning as a separate speech act, relating at times contradictory and fragmentary messages. The crux of my analysis will fall on the film *Funny Games* (1997), but Haneke's other films can also be analyzed in this way.

Funny Games (1997) is a film about a middle-class Austrian family who go for a weekend at their cottage in the country. There, they are being approached by two charming boys, Peter and Paul, who initially want to borrow some eggs but later take advantage of the family's naivety, incapacitate the father by striking his knee cap with a golf club, and play a cruel game of life and death with the mother and the son. In a series of "games" (one of them based on hide-and-seek), they first kill the family's German shepherd, then the little boy; finally, after a whole array of malicious tormenting, they nonchalantly kill the mother by throwing her out alive, tied with tape, into the lake. The whole narrative, progressing with Hitchcockian dynamism, is elegantly played out in beautiful surroundings of the Austrian Alps: the mountains, the lake, the manicured lawns and elegant cottages, all provide a familiar and plausible background to the horrific events unfolding on the screen.

In the sense of the locutionary act, both the invaders and the invaded speak the same language of European middle classes—they are well-behaved, elegant, polite, and talkative. Paul and Peter are accepted by the family because they find themselves within the same type of locutionary context as the family they are going to abuse. The politeness and knowledge of the family's cultural background functions

as a smokescreen to the real intentions of the invaders. And here we observe the first example of exasperating miscommunication. Their communication at the level of the illocutionary fails utterly. Peter and Paul's communication does not indicate the boys' real intentions—their polished statements give no hint that they are using the pretext of borrowing some eggs merely to invade the private space of this family. The request to borrow eggs is soon followed by a request to look at the father's golf clubs, which will serve as tools of incapacitation and murder; Paul later smashes the father's knee cap and then kills the dog with the very golf clubs he had admired earlier. The scene in which a golf ball falls and rolls down the stairs functions as a forewarning of worse things to come.

Within the visual symbolic of the quintessentially middle-class sport of golf, the breakdown of communication, or the *gulf* between locution and illocution, goes farther. Golf here does not represent an elegant, rather expensive game at all, but signifies the horrific events about to happen. The falling ball does not mean an invitation to the game, but the presence of Paul and his cruel jokes. First comes the ball, and then comes Paul, who finally uses the club to kill the father. Thus, further, the ball signals the breakdown between locution and illocution not only at the level of words, but also at the level of images.

At the level of perlocution, Haneke triggers the audience's need to be startled, amused, frightened, and entertained at the expense of the diegetic family's acute pain and suffering. Society wants cheap thrills and videogame images in which the indiscriminate killing goes on every second. Haneke fulfills this dream and goes even further. He breaks the wall between the audience and the film diegesis. Not only does he replay the scenario of video games, but he also asks the audience to participate in the gory events. Using Paul, Haneke addresses the audience through the eye of the camera and asks them directly if they have had enough. After all, there is half an hour of screen time more to fill, so presumably the audience needs the thrills to leave the cinema satisfied and happy. At a certain point, Haneke literally has Paul "rewind" the film in which he is a character, for the unfolding scene would provide too optimistic an ending. Initially, in this scene, the mother grabs the gun and shoots Paul. Then, the scene changes into the one in which Paul grabs the gun and shoots the son. If the first ending were chosen, the film would turn into a conventional thriller with all its elements falling neatly into place, no discord between locution and illocution, and no grand perlocutionary questions being asked. By introducing this moment of "rewinding the tape," Haneke implicates the audience in the process of fabricating violent images for their own vicious and vicarious enjoyment.

In the next film, *Code Inconnu* (2000), Haneke goes even further in his philosophical findings. Here, the split between the three levels of speech act is played out, also at three levels: that of diegesis itself; that of the film's form; and that of the fragmented speech within particular film sections. In *Code Inconnu,* Haneke presents life in Paris in the form of a mosaic of fragments of semi-related events. In the dominant fragment, we see Anne, an actress in the middle of making a thriller film. Her boyfriend

George is a photographer who takes pictures of the atrocities of war in Kosowo. George's brother Jean is trying to escape the family farming business. In another parallel fragment, Maria, an illegal immigrant, begs on the streets of Paris; she is caught without her papers and deported. She returns to her husband Dragos and her family in Romania and lies to them about finding a good job as a schoolteacher in Paris. Finally, but not exclusively, there is a fragment with Amadou, a teacher of African descent. (The film starts with Amadou, in fact.) The young man tries to defend Maria, but is abused by the police because he is black. Elsewhere, his sisters plainly deny their racial identity: one colors her hair white, while the other one does not even know where Africa is located.

In other scenes forming the atoms of these fragments, we see individuals only loosely related to the main characters, such as Amadou's uncle who speeds along in his taxi to solve the problem of his young nephew. The many supporting characters contribute to the overall picture of a society that itself is like an incomplete and patchy mosaic. Unlike Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999), which organize the fragments in a chronological and logical order with all the characters neatly in place, in *Code Inconnu* the occupants of particular fragments often have nothing at all to do with each other. They do not communicate among themselves, nor with the characters occupying the larger spaces of particular fragments. Nevertheless, together, as occupiers of the overall European space, they do communicate a perlocutionary message of despair, loneliness, and profound isolation. People of different classes, races, and nations meet and part or exist coincidentally in a Europe whose modern migratory forces are visible and acute.

Yet the fragmented scenes, again, remain unclear in both locution and illocution. Usually, the fragments are unfinished scenes with bits of conversation or dialogue cut off in mid-sentence. In essence, Haneke suggests here that locution and illocution do not really matter. People live in split realities of huge cities and participate in undefined existences, interacting with their neighbours only partially, only half-guessing what is going on in others' lives. The breakdown in communication is visible in every fragment of the film: Jean does not know how to connect with his father; Anne with her partner, George; Amadou with the French policeman; African children with their African parents; nor deaf and mute people with us, the audience. The perlocutionary effect of all these non-communications is the wish to present contemporary big cities as places of heartlessness and the site of misunderstood cultures.

In *The Piano Teacher* (2001), Haneke deals with miscommunication in a more visceral sense, as the linguistic miscommunications above the communications of the bodies. The film, which took three awards at Cannes Film Festival (including the Grand Prix) has been called by some pornographic, degrading, and too reliant on excessive violence. Nevertheless, it deals appropriately with failures of communication and the discrepancy between the language of the body and verbal language. This film about a cold and unresponsive female piano teacher, Erica, who seduces her prospective student, deals with visceral, bodily communication, which is incompat-

ible with verbal. The body communicates its desire or inexplicable longings through the images of the teacher's self-mutilation, violent and self-serving sexual acts, and the demand for silence when Erica makes love to the boy. Brent Martin explains this incompatibility in the following way:

> In one of the many sexual situations that the film offers up for comment, Erica performs oral sex on her partner in the washroom of her studio. This is not their first tryst, and on each occasion they get together, Erica makes her wish for silence during the sex act quite clear. At least, it is clear to the viewer that this is how she wishes to control the situation. But in the instance of the washroom encounter, the lover is unable to silence the words of his own body. In the heat of the moment, he cries out something that sounds like "erugh" and is quickly admonished by Erica not to make a sound. "I told you not to talk" is her instant rejoinder to the young man, and because he has disobeyed her order, she stops the sex act before it is consummated. Interestingly, at no time did he actually try to speak. It is not his mind that is in charge of the situation, it is the pure animalistic reaction of lust that is doing the communication in this scene, and what is being said is not a word or anything found in any spoken language. (Martin, unpublished student essay)

Here, Haneke produces a commentary on the contemporary society's obsession with sexuality by presenting the workings of the language of the body. The body, in and of itself, produces its own true language with its own grammar and logic. In human sexual desire, with its generally expected or socially accepted realizations, there is no discrepancy or hiatus between locution and illocution. Haneke exposes these mechanisms by denying the audience easy gratification, by subverting conventional expectations and making audiences feel uneasy, unsure of their own reactions to the presented events. By producing such disturbing visuals, Haneke makes a critical comment about a society that, desensitized to sex, only reacts to the subversions of sexual scenarios and the disturbing scenarios of sadism. It is worth noting, however, that the film displays several levels of complexity, such as class criticism, sadism in the mother-daughter relations, ageism, etc. For the analysis of its communication aspects, however, its ("deviant") sexuality is the film's most provoking aspect.

In conclusion, in *Funny Games* miscommunications signify a discrepancy between the language of the locutionary act and its morbid intentionality. In other words, Haneke criticizes the elaborate interplay between locutionary and illocutionary aspects of a speech act emitted by representatives of affluent middle classes, who are desensitized to the real intentions of the players of the communication game. By being articulate, polite, well-dressed, and well attuned to the behaviours of the middle class, both Paul and Peter easily win the trust of their victims. Once "in," they play to the tune of the cultural and social expectations of the victims, cruelly engaging them in the game of life and death. Going even further, they introduce the elements of popular culture to make the game more understandable to both the victims and the audience, also participating in the game of intentional miscommunication. Peter and Paul use phrases from video games, golf, TV shows, children's games, and entertainment business, in general, to make the disconnection between

locution and illocution even more acute. In the course of the film, the audience is addressed directly by Peter with a question whether they "enjoy the show" and whether "they had enough of violence." Both the structure of the diegesis and the changes in the events are openly presented in the most disturbing scene in the film—that of "rewinding" of the tape of the film itself.

In *Code Inconnu,* with its issues of immigration, multiculturalism, and the decomposition of bourgeois family, Haneke points to the xenophobia and fear related to immigration via the perlocutionary aspect of the speech act, which here could be understood as the whole film. Contrasts between Parisians of different race, class, or nationality trigger ignorant or apathetic reactions to the fate of the disenfranchised. Haneke introduces three fragmented and incomplete narratives that make evident "the inability to communicate effectively through each member's lack of comprehension of the other's cultural circumstances" (Pederson). Thus, in the film's locution (i.e., the pseudo-documentary scenes with fragments of dialogues directly taken "from life"), Haneke seems to comment on the scenes' illocutionary impact by pointing out the fact that these scenes are in fact broken fragments of contemporary existence, wounded statements, not conducive to understanding.

The film functions at all these levels of speech acts in many intricate manners. It is not only the communication among the protagonists that Haneke approaches critically, but also the communicative form of the film itself, being a mosaic of fragments. Haneke seems to indicate that life events are never really made explicit—either in locution or illocution. Lastly, he addresses the relation between film and reality, the nature of the image and its representability, as illustrated by Georges' treatment of the images he constantly produces with his photo camera. The overall perlocution of this particular work is that, as Haneke himself says, "the world around us cannot be described as a whole and thus cannot be fully explained, either" (Riemer 161). In this film, Haneke notes the incompatibility and asymmetry between the codes of the "sender" and "receiver" at the moment of transformation into and out of discursive form. As Stuart Hall theorizes, "the so called 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from *the lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communication exchange" (94).

In *Piano Teacher,* on the other hand, the perlocutionary aspect of the film is a comment on our desensitization to sexual imagery. The film shocks the viewer with violence, "the subversion of the conventional audience expectations with reference to pornography and sexuality" (Filippini), and to gender roles, which also seem subverted in this film. It is not the spoken language but the violent visuals that reveal the repression of sexual desires. The contrast between violence and the primordial nature of sexual desire and between the social environment of the prim and proper yet sadistic teacher of the conservatory indicates the discrepancy between locution (the presentation of "perverse" acts) and the illocution (or audience expectation). According to these expectations, it is only maladjusted or poorly educated people who commit lewd acts, not highly educated representatives of the upper and middle

classes. Yet what Haneke seems to say is that the lack of communication here is the chief characteristic of the latter segment of society, hidden behind the gates of its closely guarded world, inaccessible to outsiders.

Haneke's other films present similarly disturbing miscommunications, disturbing because, while subtle and perverse, they touch the nerve of the members of those communities in which family ties, social identities, and ethical principles have been abandoned, derailed, and almost imperceptibly changed. The perlocutionary effect of his films is devastating—after all, the action of all of these films takes place in affluent societies somewhere in Europe. In this way, Michael Haneke, philosopher, psychologist, dramatist, and filmmaker, expresses throughout his body of work contemporary Europe's social and political dilemmas. In his presentation of a kind of emotional "glaciation," he reflects upon contemporary Europe's confusion and uncertainty amidst its growing prosperity and changing political status.

Notes

I would like to thank Tracy Pederson, Brent Martin, and Ben Filippini, students of my 2003 seminar class, for their insightful remarks on Michael Haneke's films.

The first version of this paper appeared at Learneds conference in Halifax, May 2003, under the title: "Exasperating miscommunications. The cold Europe in Michael Haneke's films from Austria. *Funny Games* (1997), *Code Inconnu* (2000) and *The Piano Teacher* (2001)."

Works Cited

Austin, John L. *How to Do Things with Words.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1962.

Bach, Kent. "Speech Acts." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* <http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/spchacts.html>

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding, Decoding." *The Cultural Studies Reader.* Ed. Simon During. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Mueller, William R. "Franz Kafka: The Lonely Journey." *Celebration of Life. Studies in Modern Fiction.* New York: Sheed, 1972. 232–50.

Riemer, Willy, ed. *After Postmodernism. Austrian Literature and Film in Transition.* Riverside: Ariadne, 2000.

Searle, John R. "Meaning and Speech Acts." *Philosophical Review* 71 (October 1962).

Sokel, Walter H. *The Myth of Power and the Self. Essays on Franz Kafka*. Detroit: Wayne State U, 2002.

Wood, Robin. "In Search of the *Code Inconnu*." Cineaction 62, 2003. 41-49.

Filmography

71 Fragments of a Chronology of Time (71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls, Michael Haneke, 1994)

Benny's Video (Michael Haneke, 1992)

Code Inconnu (Michael Haneke, 2000)

Funny Games (Michael Haneke, 1997)

Magnolia (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999)

Short Cuts (Robert Altman, 1993)

The Castle (*Dass Schloss,* Michael Haneke, 1997)

The Piano Teacher (*Die Klavierspielerin,* Michael Haneke, 2001)

The Rebellion (*Die Rebellion,* Michael Haneke, 1993)