

## Film Review

### caché

Michael Haneke. *Caché*. Les Films du Losange/Wega Film (starring Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche), 2005.

Reviewed by Christine Evans

Michael Haneke's latest offering is, superficially, the closest the Austrian director has ever come to making a detective story. Promising tension and intrigue, *Caché's* premise of unwelcome surveillance is a familiar amalgam of Haneke's 1992 film *Benny's Video* and David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997); Georges and Anne (Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche) are an affluent and unbearably cultured Parisian couple who discover a series of videocassettes at their front door. Viewing the tapes, they realize that someone is recording hours of footage of their home from across the street. The tapes are soon accompanied by grotesque and crudely-drawn pictures of blood pouring forth from a child's mouth and a chicken's decapitated head, inciting Georges and Anne to conduct an investigation that will eventually reveal the identity of whomever is terrorizing them. Aside from the film's critical accolades and the Anglophone-friendly presence of actress Juliette Binoche, the film's generically-accessible premise has proven palatable to the North American filmgoing public (earning *Caché* more in its U.S. opening weekend than Haneke's previous film earned in gross, and nearly tripling the U.S. opening weekend earnings of his heretofore most popular film, 2001's *The Piano Teacher*). However, just as viewers who expected *The Piano Teacher* to be a conventional – if not provocatively transgressive – love story were unequivocally horrified, anyone who seeks out *Caché* in the hopes of a suspenseful 'whodunit' will be sorely disappointed and (we can only hope) traumatically shaken.

Nonetheless, this assumed generic accessibility affords Haneke's film with a critical space in which to defy and disturb spectatorial conjecture, and – more perversely – to simultaneously actualize expectation. For although it is indeed possible to classify *Caché* as a detective story/thriller that derails to include considerations of political strife, guilt, and culpability, it is *also* a platitude on the necessary deadlock of 'goodness'; in the absence of evil and all its comforting determinacy, we are left only with shades of 'good' – the amorphousness of which shakes the very foundations of dispassionate *bourgeoisie* ideology. One is reminded here of G.K. Chesterton's remark that the detective story reinforces that

civilization itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions... When the detective in a police



romance stands alone, and somewhat fatuously fearless amid the knives and fists of a thieves' kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure, while the burglars and footpads are merely placid old cosmic conservatives, happy in the immemorial respectability of apes and wolves... [The detective story] is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies (On Lying in Bed and Other Essays by G.K. Chesterton. Ed. Alberto Manguel. Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2000. pp. 284).

This observation should not only be interpreted in confluence with the old comments regarding 'the banality of evil', but *qua* the greater complexity of 'goodness', morality, and the often unpleasant Kantian categorical imperative which holds sway over our duties as ethical subjects. In many cases – to one of which *Caché* bears witness – 'doing the right thing' is perplexingly dark and disturbing, and coerced from us by unwholesome people at inopportune times. Here, one should read Chesterton's 'morality' as not only the exciting, reactionary obverse of dull, opportunistic evil (exciting because one must be truly daring to restore justice and virtue in the world – the lesson of so many children's films), but as fundamentally dark and conspiratorial *in itself*.

It is in this context of internally divided (and eternally divisible) ethics that *Caché's* cast of vaguely affable and wholly ordinary Parisian literati stand out as some of Haneke's most detestable characters to date. Indeed, Haneke's former cadre of existentially-divided perverts and psychopaths here appear downright harmless in their roles as solipsistically self-immersed *bourgeois* killers, compared to the pervasive, generationally destructive logic of negligence, apathy, and unclaimed guilt which regulates the lives of *Caché's* characters. If ethics truly is the most dark and daring of conspiracies, is there anything more reprehensible than a Haneke character who may (or may not) 'do the right thing?'

Although *Caché* has its fair share of the creeping unease and shocking violence so characteristic of its director, Haneke's treatment of *Caché's* central family is very inwardly-focused; whereas the families of many earlier Haneke films have suffered a violent cultural rupture, a sudden invasion of awareness, Georges and Anne aren't granted the luxury of marauding summer-house killers, a murder caught on camera, or the apocalypse. Rather, the situation presented in *Caché* is very similar to *The Seventh Continent* (1989), where Haneke protects his protagonist-family from the threat of outside invasion, thereby affording them only the privilege of self-destruction. ©