Glocal gloom: existential space in Haneke’s French-language films

As Janet Harbord remarks at the start of her article for Vertigo on Haneke’s Code Unknown and Iñárritu’s Amores perros, recent interest in and debate about space and cinema ‘has everything to do with the current context, an age of globalisation, which has radically reconditioned our relationship to space’ (Harbord 2004: 3). Uncertainty about local life, decreased contact in local communities, the encroachment of electronic communications upon a large proportion of Western households and the ‘shrinking’ of space brought about by ever-increasing air travel are some of the social trends of globalisation Harbord considers, which with the release of films like Iñárritu’s more recent Babel, show no signs of disappearing from our cinema screens. Code Unknown is probably the film in which Haneke tackles the theme of the global city most directly, but running rapidly through his German-language then French-language filmography, it is immediately obvious that he has always been a filmmaker of space rather than place, in the sense that ‘local’ phenomena defined as events, customs or practices particular to one city, region or even nation, seem of little interest to him. Haneke’s eye is detained less by the quirky, the idiomatic or the quaint than by the flat, the anonymous and the expressionless: as Paul Arthur observes, ‘the treatment of urban exteriors in Hidden and Code Unknown recalls the huge architectural photostudies of Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky’ (Arthur 2005: 28).

The aspect of this aloofness from locale Haneke has been most articulate about is the indifference to his films of their national setting – and perhaps therefore also their language(s). Code Unknown gained its title because of the longstanding use in France of a ‘digicode’ that has to be punched into a keypad to admit apartment-dwellers to their apartment blocks, but Haneke’s reason for setting the film in Paris was just that he

![can only see two multicultural cities in Europe: Paris and London, two capitals of countries with a colonial past….This is obvious just from sitting in the underground/métro. Vienna was also the capital of an empire, and if you pick up the phone directory, you see more than 50% Yugoslav- or Czech-sounding names, but in the underground, it’s not as visible (L’Humanité 15 November 2000, p.3). Multiculturalism is clearly one of Haneke’s chief preoccupations, either as failed project or utopian ideal, but as a filmmaker he is concerned more with the visibility of a city’s social fabric than with the political history that brought it about. In his native Austria, the generation born of parents who immigrated from Hungary, Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia ‘has forgotten [its origins] to the point where it sees itself as more strictly and radically Austrian than those descended from Austrians’ (L’Humanité 15 November 2000, p.3), but Vienna could not have played the global city Paris acts as so effectively in Code Unknown and Hidden – and that the city has become a character in these two films is highly revealing – only because the physiognomy of its inhabitants does not visually signify their provenance.

Haneke, then, is a leading example of transnational filmmaking, a dimension of his cinema literalised – since it already had supranational concerns – by the move from Austria to Paris and shift from German into French that took place with Code Unknown in 2000. However, it is another – and, I shall argue, the second major – aspect of his
cinema of space rather than place I shall dwell on here; his use and realisation of existential or lived space, the type of space transformed by the movement within it of human subjects. Existential space as theorised by phenomenology is the very opposite of unowned, neutral, untouched space; the raw materiality of untilled ground, unexplored forest or abandoned, unsold manufactured objects. Animated by the lived bodies that move through it, existential space has ‘atmosphere’, resonates with past happenings, and thrills with the possibility of future ones. By selecting a number of scenes and moments from Haneke’s four French-language films, *Code Unknown, The Piano Teacher, Time of the Wolf* and *Hidden*, I shall demonstrate how existential space is crucial to the atmosphere of anxiety and tension generated throughout Haneke’s cinema – the pervasive questioning, uncertainty and fear that have become his trademark. First, though, to illustrate the inherent drama I am claiming for Haneke’s *mise en scène*, I shall turn to an architect-turned-critic whose writings on cinematic space will help to show the interest – and indeed, contemporary currency – of a phenomenological approach to film. Juhani Pallasmaa’s *The Architecture of Image: existential space in cinema* consists mainly of essays on Hitchcock’s *Rope* and *Rear Window*, Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia*, Kubrick’s *The Shining* and Antonioni’s *The Passenger*, but the introduction to his book treats diverse issues that pertain to cinematic lived space, including poetry, the architecture of imagery, emotion, light and matter.

Unsurprisingly, the main argument of Pallasmaa’s introduction, ‘Lived Space in Architecture and Cinema’, is that cinema is closer to architecture than any other art form, because both arts articulate lived space and ‘create experiential scenes of life situations’ (AI p.13). Lived space may be defined (although Pallasmaa offers several mutually enhancing explanations rather than one definition) as ‘space that is inseparably integrated with the subject’s concurrent life situation’ (AI p.18), an integration that takes place through the mental or psychical internalization of our perceptions of the spaces we move in. As conscious, embodied and mobile beings, our experience of space is ‘a kind of exchange – I place myself in the space and the space settles in me’. Central to this understanding of the experience of space is a phenomenological understanding of consciousness as embodied, the obverse of the Cartesian ‘mind/body split’: the mental cannot exist independently of the physical, or as Pallasmaa puts it, ‘We do not live separately in material and mental worlds; these experiential domains are fully intertwined’ (AI p.18). Through explaining that lived space ‘is always a combination of external space and inner mental space, actuality and mental projection’ (ibid.), Pallasmaa is able to claim convincingly that this ‘identification’ of physical and mental space is ‘intuitively grasped’ (AI p.22) by film directors and architects: real architecture, like the

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1 Pallasmaa 2001, hereinafter AI. Tellingly, Pallasmaa confirms the preference for an *auteur* cinema such as Haneke’s indicated by the directors that feature in his book when he states ‘Regardless of their unavoidable nature as the products of collective effort, both film and architecture are arts of the *auteur*, of the individual artistic creator’ (AI p.14).

2 As well as ‘exchange’, Pallasmaa uses the word ‘dialogue’ to describe this reciprocity in our experience of space, despite having previously specified that he does not think that the meaning of images is necessarily ‘tied to verbalized meaning….Only a fraction of images received by our nervous system and having an influence on our behaviour and emotional states find a verbal correspondence in our consciousness. We react to images before we understand them’ (AI p.9 note 3). Pallasmaa’s use of the word ‘dialogue’ is casual, however (a ‘mention’ rather than a ‘use’, in the language of speech act theory), and has no significant impact on his conceptualisation of our reciprocal experience of existential space.
space of filmic projection, ‘is an exchange of experiential feelings and meanings between the space constructed of matter and the mental space of the subject’ (AI p.35).

The Hitchcock, Tarkovsky, Kubrick and Antonioni films Pallasmaa discusses in *The Architecture of Image* probably contain an above-average proportion of ‘architectural’ images created by the filming of complex or grandly designed sets and locations. But although Pallasmaa’s book addresses mainly the look of the films he analyses, his conviction about the intimate relationship of cinema to architecture (and vice versa) concerns not only architectural imagery but the articulation of space *per se*. Between them, architectural imagery and the articulation of space ‘create the basic dramatic and choreographic rhythm of any film’ (AI p.32): when one runs Haneke’s French-language films through the projector of the mind, there are not many imposing or painterly images to linger over, but one is (I certainly am) immediately struck by the unusually choreographic approach he takes to directing. In the ‘Filming the Boulevard sequences’ extra included on the Artificial Eye DVD release of *Code Unknown*, Haneke talks non-stop for a full 11 minutes about how he planned the film’s rather virtuoso 8-minute sequence shot ‘Boulevard 1 – Ball of Paper’, whose entire look and *movements* were sketched out mentally and on storyboards before filming began. As he confirms in another interview about *Code Unknown*, ‘I write my ideas down on little pieces of paper, then assemble these on a big board. This is the longest and the most necessary part of the work…..Constructing the overall picture [*l’ensemble*] is much more complicated [than writing dialogue] and takes time. Anyway, I never start writing if I haven’t got the entire structure in my head’ (Cieutat 2000: 25). Calling Haneke’s working method ‘architectural’ is no exaggeration: the identification of a Parisian boulevard suitable for the filming of this early scene of *Code Unknown* was determined entirely by its having a suitable spatial configuration.

The already much commented-upon first image of *Hidden* is almost a textbook demonstration of how to film lived space: although emptiness is the dominant impression made by the fixed shot of Georges’ (Daniel Auteuil) and Anne’s (Juliette Binoche) discreetly situated and ivy-clad Parisian home, this nothingness (Anne’s reply to Georges’ ‘Well?’, the first word on the soundtrack and the moment at which we realise we are watching a tape with them, is ‘Nothing’) is carefully punctuated by several human presences; first a pedestrian wearing a satchel who walks down the Rue d’Iris (the street in which the couple’s house is situated); second Anne herself exiting from the house, and thirdly a cyclist who speeds down the street that leads off the Rue d’Iris just opposite Anne’s and Georges’ property, the street in which the camera is situated. At this point, as the soundtrack cuts in bringing to the spectator’s consciousness the important realization that s/he is watching a recording – a realization requiring articulation, albeit not aloud – a sudden flurry of activity occurs in the scene: a red car passes in the Rue d’Iris, a female pedestrian emerges from behind the camera into the field of vision, and another woman walks across the T-junction formed by the two streets, moving in the same direction as the first. Despite the verdict of non-activity passed on the scene by Anne’s ‘Nothing’, the space framed by this opening image of the film is populated: pedestrians move through it, cars are parked along the kerbs, and a cyclist weaves his way through this pretty but rather claustrophobic corner of Paris’s 13th *arrondissement*. The brilliance of Haneke’s delayed revelation to the spectator that s/he is ‘actually’ (in filmic space) situated inside Anne’s and Georges’ house in front of their television screen, probably on one of their
amply proportioned sofas, is that public space becomes private: rather than experiencing the comforting rhythm of street activity, the spectator is teleported (as it were) into the anxious, threatened interior of the couple’s spacious living-cum-dining-room. It is, I would argue, only by so effectively setting up the exterior of this opening scene as lived, existential space that Haneke is able to make the spectator feel the same fear that Anne and Georges experience when they receive the video tapes and drawings, which literally come out of nowhere (their origins remain unknown and unidentified). The interior of the couple’s home begins as and remains a cold, uneasy space, divided up rather than shared: as Catherine Wheatley observes, its colour scheme of greys, browns and beiges ‘indicates a climate of disaffection and alienation as powerfully as Douglas Sirk’s Technicolor spectacles convey his characters’ emotional excess’, and ‘Haneke’s framing of the Laurents, who rarely face each other or the camera, reaffirms this atmosphere. At dinner parties the two adults talk at cross-purposes, neither looking at nor listening to the other’ (Wheatley 2006: 32). The couple’s lack of comfortable familiarity with their own domestic space is illustrated again when their son Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky) goes missing, and is absent for several hours before they realise he is not in the house: characteristically, Georges has been working (at home), while Anne has been out for dinner with Pierre (Daniel Duval), the family friend who may be her lover.

In Haneke’s films, private and public space, like interior, mental and exterior, ‘real’ space, refuse to remain in the clearly delimited, self-identical categories that would ensure the spectator’s peace of mind. Jean-Philippe Gravel finds another striking instance of this instability in Hidden:

This slippage sometimes operates in an extremely subtle, almost subliminal fashion: during a shot filmed by one of the TV cameras in the studio Georges works in, a strange pan takes us from the set where Georges is finishing shooting his programme into the wings, where Georges is summoned to take a phone call. In this way the camera, with a rarely used sliding movement, transports us seamlessly from the public into the private sphere, from an “official and authorised” point of view to one that is indiscreet and potentially intrusive (Gravel 2006: 9)

There are in fact very few scenes in Hidden where Georges is seen in public space, two of them being this brief signing-off statement of an episode of his literary show and the awkward interview with his boss in which he has to ‘go public’ about receipt of the threatening tapes and drawings. Georges is filmed almost entirely in domestic and family spaces, as a private individual, which of course corresponds to the psychological domain in which the fiercely resented and unavowed guilt from his childhood lies. Correspondingly, it is of more than symbolic significance that his lie to Anne about his first visit to Majid’s (Maurice Bénichou) flat – he says that the flat was unoccupied – takes the form of a denial of Majid’s lived, domestic space. After Majid’s suicide, Georges wanders through Paris for several hours, during which we see him only briefly, emerging from a cinema (a very ambiguously ‘public’ space, given the privacy film screens allow). When he finally returns home, he climbs a previously unfilmed staircase to the couple’s bedroom. Both stairs and bedroom are in darkness, and when Anne arrives after being summoned, he requests that she leave the lights off. The bedroom is cut off
from the rest of the house, a spacious but sombre loft to which Georges retreats again at the end of the film after coming home early from work, claiming to have caught some kind of virus but in all probability just unable to face the world after the reassuring security of his professional space has been comprehensively threatened by Majid’s son, in a confrontation that finally takes place in the men’s lavatory, the only place at the TV station not overheard and unexposed to public view (the offices are open plan, with huge glass windows and partitions). The bedroom’s private darkness and the oblivion it offers speak volumes about Georges’ experience of space at this point in his life: haunted by nightmares that throw him back into childhood, his interior life has taken him over, leaving him neither the energy nor the attention to actively inhabit the world in which his family and colleagues move.

Strong associations of individual characters with the spaces they move in, or between, are a sure indication of the prevalence of existential space, and although one such association emerges at the end of Hidden, they are much more marked throughout Code Unknown and The Piano Teacher. Three of the four principal characters of Code Unknown are defined by the regular journeys they make between Paris and territories strikingly ‘other’ to the crowded, moneyed activity of the global city: Maria is deported back to Romania then returns; Georges shuttles back and forth between Kosovo and Paris in his work as a war photographer, and Amadou’s family lives between Paris and Mali, culturally but also literally (his father returns to Africa early in the film, leaving Amadou’s younger Paris-based brothers and sisters uncertain what is going on). Only Anne dwells in Paris in a way that makes it, and it alone, her lived space, an association I would argue is striking in ‘Boulevard 1 – Ball of Paper’, where the breezy, urbanite manner of her conversation with Georges’ temporarily homeless brother harmonises perfectly with the boulevard’s constant traffic, human and motorised.

In The Piano Teacher, private spaces – particularly the apartment Professor of Music Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert) shares with her dominating, possessive, intrusive elderly mother (Annie Girardot) – abound with meanings and with the feelings of the characters that inhabit them. While the studio where middle-aged Erika teaches the piano is her fiefdom, and the scene of much bullying disciplining of her pupils, the apartment is her mother’s. In the opening scene of the film we see Erika trying to cross the hall of the apartment to her own room (a very dubiously ‘private’ space given the non-availability of a key, and not the room she sleeps in, since she and her mother share a bedroom), only to find entry to it physically barred by her mother, who insists on knowing where she has spent the three hours since her last pupil left the conservatory. Her mother’s territorial attitude manifests itself most dramatically when Erika is followed home by Walter (Benoît Magimel), the handsome young pupil romancing her, desperate to find a private space for the two of them to share. Her mother’s ever-vigilant guard over the apartment is such that Erika has to ask permission for the privacy Walter is so urgently seeking: in the time it takes her mother to get over the surprise of this spontaneous (and unprecedented?) visit by one of her male friends, she and Walter have barred the door to her room from the inside with a heavy wardrobe.

Erika’s battle for privacy at home is of course inseparable from the years of stiflingly close and disciplinarian contact with her mother that seem to be responsible for the repressed, perverse and above all masochistic sexuality she has developed: practices we witness include voyeurism and self-harming that takes the form of the cutting of her
labia, while she indulges in fantasies of full-blown sadomasochism that disgust Walter and lead to retribution that sets off a downward spiral of self-hatred. As the film’s narrative reaches this sombre conclusion, however, space becomes more and more meaningful: where Walter was formerly desperate to share privacy with Erika, she now seeks it out with him at the club where he plays ice hockey. Persuaded into having intercourse but disgusted again by her inability to go through with it, Walter then turns up at the apartment in the middle of the following night: it is entirely fitting that the revenge he takes upon Erika – violent blows, a kicking, and intercourse it is difficult to describe as rape, since she offers no resistance and displays not a flicker of either pain or pleasure – takes place in the windowless, oppressively claustrophobic hallway of her mother’s fiefdom. More than just material space, the hallway, heavily coded ‘interior’ and ‘female’ like the whole apartment, is a space into which Erika’s psychological confinement to her mother’s sphere of influence is projected, an existential space of anguish, conflict and ultimately defeat. Walter will never enter it again, and since she can no longer play the piano in the public spaces of performance where Walter moves without guilt or shame, Erika has nowhere left to go.

In *Time of the Wolf*, the filming of which Haneke brought forward after the catastrophe of the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States (Cieutat and Rouyer 2005: 21), existential space is as important as it is to *Code Unknown*, *The Piano Teacher* and *Hidden*, but signifies through its absence rather than its presence. Most striking in this regard is the film’s final shot, where a look out onto a landscape from a moving train is not attributed to any of the characters with whom we have become familiar – principally Anne (Isabelle Huppert), her daughter Eva (Anaïs Demoustier) and her son Ben (Lucas Biscombe). In the opening scene of the film, as the family arrive at their holiday home in a sombre atmosphere indicating extraordinary circumstances (the unspecified catastrophe that has caused society to regress to a condition as ungoverned as in the *Wolfzeit*, a German term describing something very like ‘the Dark Ages’) Anne’s husband Georges is shot down by an intruder in cold blood. They take flight, and eventually refuge with an assorted group of strangers based next to a railway. The dystopic narrative of *Time of the Wolf* envisions a borderless Europe whose spaces can only be measured and known by the movement of the few trains that still pass through them: as one would expect in the circumstances, the characters are preoccupied by locomotion and regaining their lost mobility, and react with desperate – though repeatedly disappointed – excitement whenever a train passes inexplicably by without stopping. Trains function symbolically in the film, standing in for the movement and modernity the characters have lost, but the spectator cannot help also being reminded of the overdetermined symbolism of trains in European history – that is, of the trains of the Holocaust, whose cargoes were destined for extermination. At a moment in history when everyday living is a struggle morally as well as materially, a situation best illustrated by Anne’s obligation to cohabit with her husband’s murderer (since there is no judicial system that can establish his guilt), the future is entirely uncertain.

The drama of *Time of the Wolf* ends with an ominous scene in which Ben, almost mute throughout the action, approaches a bonfire built at a distance from the settlement and takes off all his clothes, apparently under the influence of the obscure and primitive belief-system circulating among adults in the settlement regarded by his educated, bourgeois mother as slightly crazed. Since much of *Time of the Wolf* is comprised of long
takes, the abrupt cut to the final shot that occurs at this point comes as a shock which reinforces the vigour of the question it puts to Haneke’s audience: who is in the train? who has regained mobility? who has broken away from the settlement in the name of modernity, history and progress? and will s/he arrive at a better place than the one s/he has left? As has been noted, *Time of the Wolf* is a kind of inverted image (a photographic negative, perhaps) of most of Haneke’s other films: it has a forward-looking narrative, however thwarted, and invites identification with characters where *Code Unknown*, *The Piano Teacher* and *Hidden* repeatedly impede it. In Haneke’s other French-language films, the key players are firmly linked to the spaces within (or between) which they move – that is, the films depend upon existential space for their drama. In *Time of the Wolf*, on the other hand, there are no spaces inhabited by bodies/people who are either content to be alone or can cohabit peacefully with their fellow humans, male and female. Spaces are unpopulated, threatening and dangerous, then conflict-riven and entirely lacking in privacy and the mark of individuals: their emptiness sucks the visitor in rather than welcoming him/her, and there is no safe place in which to reside. The film is a drama of negative existential space, a cumulative experience of tension and discomfort that makes its final shot all the more memorable, because the atmosphere suddenly becomes dreamy and contented. The questions Haneke is putting to the spectator may be ‘who do you identify with? which member of the fatherless Laurent family do you want to survive? will s/he play an instrumental role in rebuilding society, and will the society that results be similar or radically different from the late modern (or postmodern) patriarchal capitalist one that has been inexplicably wiped out?’

Despite being much less engaging than Haneke’s other French-language films (it received generally poor reviews), *Time of the Wolf*, then, is particularly interesting to consider for its *mise en scène*, and in relation to Haneke’s status as a quintessentially ‘European’ filmmaker with an articulated anti-Hollywood stance. Transnational space is one of its themes: its displaced characters no longer have national borders or other administratively delimited zones by which to orient themselves, but the film’s landscapes and geography are (arguably) recognisably European, suggesting that Haneke may view the film’s collapsed modernity as so marked. On the other hand, the unspecific verisimilitude of *Time of the Wolf* may be the best example of a glocalizing *mise en scène* in Haneke’s French-language cinema, a *mise en scène* compromised by the Parisian setting of *Code Unknown* and *Hidden*, even if Haneke makes light of the Frenchness of the multiculturalism and national guilt the two films examine. If globalisation is reconditioning our relationship to space in as thoroughgoing a fashion as many writers and commentators, Haneke is surely one of the best contemporary dramatizers of this historic shift, a hawk-eyed observer and recorder of glocal gloom, discomfort and unease.

**References**

Translations from articles in French are my own.

Anon, F, (2003), ‘Le Temps du Loup’, review in *Positif* 512 (October) p.51

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3 Haneke himself has said that in *Time of the Wolf* he wanted his fiction to have ‘identificatory potential’, something he was aware of resisting when making *Code Unknown* (Anon 2003: 51).

Cieutat, Michel and Rouyer, Philippe (2005), ‘Entretien avec Michael Haneke: On ne montre pas la réalité, just son image manipulée’, Positif 536 (October), 21-5.


**Filmography**


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