

Hidden (Caché)

France/Austria/Germany/Italy 2004

Crew and Cast

Michael Hanecke
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 Christian Bergere
 Daniel Auteuil
 Juliette Binoche
 Maurice Binéhou
 Annie Girardot

Synopsis

A hidden watcher points a camera at a Parisian house. Inside it a supremely middle class couple realise they are under surveillance and feel increasingly uneasy. Tapes of camera footage of the house and childish but sinister drawings of a small boy vomiting blood and of a decapitated chicken bleeding from its severed neck are delivered to their home. The husband Georges (Auteuil), a well-known television presenter whose set design is identical to his real living room, begins uneasily to suspect the source of the deliveries. He therefore sets out to discover more. The real threats start when Georges confronts a suspected culprit Majid (Maurice Bénichou), an Algerian whom he had known as a child and the course of whose life Georges determined with a selfish childhood act. Georges eventually reveals, under duress, that he lied to his parents in order to persuade them against adopting Majid, whose own parents had been killed in the Paris massacre of 17 October 1961; the images in the drawings are visual reminders of the lies he told.



Review

Michael Haneke is best known for films that violently play on the western audience's guilt about an unequal world. *Hidden* describes a more psychological game, anticipating terror as much from within as from the world outside. The film opens with a long shot of a house facing a street called the rue des Iris, which, as any Paris street map will show, is in a quiet part of the 13th arrondissement. There is no movement and no foreground sound, only the murmur of cars in the distance and birds twittering. This shot looks like CCTV footage. To begin with, as audience, you get restless. What are we watching this for? But as the film unwinds you begin to realise that the camera work is a source of a creeping sense of violation – and threat. Who is the unknown watcher? Why does he keep a camera pointed on this street, that house, those people? *Hidden* sees Haneke's first use of high-definition video cameras which allow him to set up a narrative device that will mix the images from the videotapes with the images of Georges' 'life'. In this way, the director formally achieves the maturity of a meta-linguistic style he has long been developing which makes the image itself a central character of his movies. The video sequences are generally marked out from the filmic 'reality' by the use of static cameras, but even this doesn't give the viewer any purchase on what kind of images we are seeing as the line is blurred not only between film and life but between whether we are seeing an image in the process of being filmed or being played back.

The allegory of the historical treatment of the Algerians by the French is hard to miss, foregrounded as it is by the deaths of Majid's parents. The events of 17 October 1961, when a protest against French policy in Algeria sparked a huge police operation in which hundreds of demonstrators were killed or injured, were not acknowledged at the time, nor for decades afterwards. Even today the subject remains taboo.

Haneke's last three French-language works - *The Piano Teacher*, *Code Unknown* (2000) and *Time of the Wolf* - have all provided cultural commentators with plenty of material to get their teeth into: the first prompting readings of the film as an examination of western society's repressive attitude to sex and sexuality; the last two perhaps more directly linked to *Hidden* in their treatment of migration, race and social hierarchy.

This obvious thematising of political concerns is perhaps one reason why *Hidden* is being heralded as Haneke's most accessible film to date. In internet chatrooms and arts publications alike *Hidden* is compared to Gillo Pontecorvo's seminal *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) as well as to Alain Tasma's *Nuit Noire, October 17, 1961* and Philippe Faucon's *La Trahison! The Betrayal* (both 2005): two films that document the Algerian struggle for independence from French colonialism and were shown alongside *Hidden* at last year's Toronto film festival. But Haneke himself has long railed against his films being seen as treatments of specific national situations. Ever since a journalist asked of his debut feature *The Seventh Continent* whether "Austria is really that bad?", the director has stressed the universality of the situations his films depict. The protagonists of *Funny Games* might be Austrian but their holiday home could be anywhere in Europe; the events of *The Piano Teacher* take place in a Vienna inhabited by French speakers; *Time of the Wolf* is set in a nameless state.

So while the events of *Hidden* might take place against an unmistakably Parisian backdrop, their implications reach far beyond. As Haneke told Christopher Sharrett in an interview for *Cineaste* in summer 2003, *Hidden* is "about the French occupation of Algeria on a broad level, but more personally is a story of guilt and the denial of guilt."

Edited from a review by Catharine Wheatley in *Sight and Sound* (Feb'06)