Auditioning for Shakespeare:
Twelfth Night in Michael Haneke's
Code Unknown

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1   The Austrian film director Michael Haneke has directed 10 feature films since his first in 1989, four of which are French-speaking – and which incidentally were shot the one after the other, between 2000 and 2005, constituting a French period in his filmography.

> *The Seventh Continent* (1989)
> *Benny's Video* (1992)
> *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994)
> *Funny Games* (1997)
> **Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys (2000)**
> **The Piano Teacher (2002)**
> **Time of the Wolf (2003)**
> **Hidden (2005)**
> *Funny Games* (US remake) (2008)
> *The White Ribbon* (2009)
> **Love (2012)**

2   Interviewed by the German film director Alexander Kluge in 2008, Michael Haneke expresses his passion for France:

Michael Haneke Interviewed by Alexander Kluge Video (2:38)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gY5SkBJQHAQ [1]

In a few words, the interview offers an angle to analyze the Shakespearean reference in *Code Unknown*. Indeed, the "classical" play Kluge refers to ("*wenn sie einen klassischen text erzählt,*" i.e. «when she recites a classical text») is *Twelfth Night*. It is interesting that he uses the very vague adjective "classical" to refer to it when he could have specified "Shakespearean:" apparently, identifying the play in the film is not necessarily easy for people who do not "know their Shakespeare."

3   Another interesting aspect is the fact that Binoche represents a "problem" (although she initiated the project) because her status allegedly makes it difficult to believe in a supposedly "realistic" story, in which she would not be Academy-Award-Winner Juliette Binoche. Haneke

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[1] Haneke: "When I was young, I had a passion for French literature: existentialism, Sartre, Camus, the *Nouvelle Vague*. France was *the* country. […] I've been able to direct these films in France thanks to Juliette Binoche's phone call. She had seen my trilogy and called me to ask if we could work together. But she didn't know on what. I racked my brain. I knew that having a star attached to a project was an advantage. But I only know France as a tourist, so I decided to talk about foreigners ["*Fremde*" in German, which means foreign, alien, other, strange] in France… But Juliette represented a problem even if she initiated the film because to make a realistic film with a star is difficult. And that is why I invented the character of the actress. It seemed more adequate."

Alexander Kluge: "It's nice to see her… this notion of performance ― when she recites a classical text on stage."

thus decided that she would interpret the role of an actress in the film.

4   I have found critical material about the allusion [2] which I intended to study and consequently did not work "from scratch." Luckily though, either the people who already mentioned the allusion did so "in passing" or I don't agree at all with the way others received the allusion. But I am convinced of one thing: studying a Shakespearean reference made by a filmmaker tells us a lot about the director's methods and views and helps us discriminate between purely ornamental references and structural ones. Considering *Code Unknown* via its 3-minute-long Shakespearean allusion offers real insight into Haneke's perception of cinema and into the way he treats his audience. Haneke is known for being particularly concerned and minute about realism – hence his dislike for too-famous actors who take the film away from reality. He is also convinced that reality can only be rendered through fragments. [3] *Code Unknown* is built from fragments, i.e. a concatenation of scenes which are often incomplete, start *in medias res*, and sometimes stop "in the middle" of things as well. The full title of the film is actually *Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys*. [4]

5   In an extraordinary opening scene, a virtuoso 10-minute-long sequence shot on a boulevard, the main characters in the film meet and argue: and the rest of the film will follow them independently, like the many fragments of the exposition scene. The plot of the film, and its original and somewhat puzzling treatment, should be briefly outlined:

> The film features several different storylines, all of which intersect periodically throughout the film. The film's opening scene features a brief encounter with four of the main characters: Anne Laurent (Juliette Binoche) is an actress working in Paris, and she walks briefly with her boyfriend's younger brother Jean. After they part, Jean throws a piece of garbage at Maria, a homeless woman sitting on the side of the road. Amadou, the child of Malian immigrants, witnesses this and confronts Jean. The two fight, and eventually Amadou and Maria are both taken to a police station for questioning. Amadou is released presumably shortly after, though we learn that he was held, beaten and shamed, but Maria is deported to her native Romania and she reconnects with her family there. [5]

6   We then follow the characters' stories ― whose intricacies cannot be easily summed up ― among them Anne, who auditions for the role of Maria in *Twelfth Night*.

<div align="center">

Twelfth Night **Audition Video (2:39)**
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ON3iAdxNmwE

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7   *Code Unknown* is the only film in Haneke's filmography which can be included in our database. I find the film truly remarkable and have done so since the first time I ever saw it, some 10 years ago, at a time when I was a student in Cambridge working on twentieth century poetry. I had, I must confess, failed to identify the Shakespearean quotation then, but I don't think it prevented me from either understanding or enjoying the film. The quotation is

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[2] That was not the case when I worked on Shakespearean allusions in Téchiné. See "André Téchiné's 'Shakespearean Trilogy'." Ed. Sarah Hatchuel & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin. *Shakespeare on Screen:* Hamlet. Mont Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2011. 277-90. Reprinted in *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonia* (2010-), éd. Patricia Dorval & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, Université Montpellier III (France), Institut sur la Renaissance, l'Âge Classique et les Lumières (IRCL), 2012 (http://shakscreen.org.com/analysis/analysis_shakespearean_trilogy/).

[3] See documentary *Portrait* "*Ma Vie, Michael Haneke,*" in the *Ruban Blanc* DVD, © 2009, Les Films du Losange – X Filme Creative Pool – Wega Film – Lucky Red – France 3 Cinema – ARD/DEGETO – Bayeruscher Rundfunk – Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, 2010 TFI Vidéo.

[4] See also Haneke's *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994).

[5] *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 12 November 2011. Web. 07 June 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_Unknown>. As I explained while reading this paper during the conference, I do not think that we should be ashamed to quote *Wikipedia*, particularly when it offers useful and quality summaries like this one. Internet sources also interestingly illustrate how a film was generally received and/or understood.

consequently not essential for a viewer to pick up. What is essential in the audition scene is the seeming absence of camera viewpoint which leaves the viewers on their own, with their intimate instincts and personal understanding, which can be, at times, wrong or misleading.

8   The notion I would like to focus on throughout this paper is *reception*, being more than ever uninterested in the so-called "intentions" of the director (or whether or not he was consciously aware that the quotation informed the film as a whole, and vice versa). This notion is particularly pregnant here because, as Haneke's camera shows rather than tells, the message of the film and the meaning of the scenes are for the spectator to decide, which is no easy task.

9   **I. Identifying the quotation**

The first problem raised by the scene is very plainly that of the identification of the quotation. Do audiences identify the text, although neither the name of the playwright nor the title of the play is ever mentioned? I have a theory: I think that French viewers don't ― as I did not myself, when I knew very little about Shakespeare's plays. A good way to prove this is to read French reviews written when the film was released. All of them present Anne as a struggling actress, though none of them precisely evokes the fact that she auditions for (or rehearses) *Twelfth Night*. When one types "Code inconnu La Nuit des rois" into Google, one won't find anything helpful. French critics writing about the film, or cinemagoers giving their opinion about it on the internet, never mention that particular scene, or do so only incidentally. "*On rit au théâtre en audition*" was the only reference I could find on the official 2000 Cannes film festival internet site.[6] On the other hand, here is a selection of what you may find if you type "Code inconnu, Code Unknown, Twelfth Night" into Google:

> Juliette Binoche, playing Anne, an actress ― we see her shooting a thriller, auditioning for a role in *Twelfth Night*, making rent with her craft if not quite hitting the big time. [7]

> In one scene, shot from the back of a theater, Anne stands onstage rehearsing a monologue from *Twelfth Night*, pouring her heart out to no response from anybody, if there is anybody, in the darkened seats. "Is anybody out there?" she inquires after a long silence, just before the shot snuffs quickly to black. Well, audience? Michael Haneke is asking you a question. [8]

> Among other things, *Code Unknown* is also an essay on performance. Paradoxically, Anne proves an intense, vivid actress in just the sort of tawdry thriller that Haneke seems to despise; it's when she turns to high art that she is out of her depth, giving a hysterically uncontrolled audition for *Twelfth Night*. Binoche plays on several different registers as a character who is a professional blank slate: what makes Anne realistic is that we can't reduce her to easily defined traits. This is a truly complex performance, unvarnished by narcissism, and a corrective to Binoche's hollow charm in the mendacious *Chocolat*. (Wouldn't it be instructive to hear Haneke's opinion of that film?). [9]

10   Very characteristically, one talks about what one knows and feels comfortable with: English-speaking audiences and critics recognize Shakespeare more easily, though, of course, they do thanks to the subtitles ― and the English subtitles do give clues about the origin of the quotation, as for example:

> If she do, he'll smile, and take't for a great favour (*Twelfth Night*, III.2.78-79)

"Do" and "take't" obviously involve Renaissance spelling and grammar and help date the text,

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[6] <http://www.cannes-fest.com/2000/film_codeinconnu.htm>.

[7] <http://www.digitallyobsessed.com/displaylegacy.php?ID=3796>.

[8] <http://roberthorton.wordpress.com/2010/02/02/code-inconnu/>.

[9] Romney, Jonathan. *The Independent*. Monday, 28 May 2001.

whereas "*Si elle le fait, il est capable de sourire de plus belle, et de prendre cela pour un excellent signe*" does not give any indication about where the text comes from. Furthermore, reading the name Malvolio is different from hearing it pronounced. Thus, English-speaking viewers have a double advantage over the French: knowledge of the written text, and access to it on the screen.

11   I was, then, particularly struck by the following review of the film, [10] which presented the character of Anne as follows:

> She's an inconsistent actress — she delivers one of the intentionally worst readings of Shakespeare on film. [11]

This reception of the scene could appear anecdotal. It is, however, widespread.

12   II. How should we understand the scene?

Internet film critics Aaron Cutler and Kevin B. Lee have, similarly, posted on YouTube a video explaining that the scene is an example of a good actress knowing how to play a bad actress.

Good Bad Acting of Juliette Binoche Video (1:49)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFljaMQrulA

13   Again, reception changes according to the viewer's nationality, though it must be very difficult for foreigners to be able to judge the quality of such a short performance if they don't know the language and don't grasp the cultural context. As far as I'm concerned, I couldn't agree less with the points made in the video. Neither do I really understand why Peter Brunette calls the scene "experimental" in his book on Haneke:

> Again to Anne as actress. She is alone on a stage, a tiny, laughing figure bathed in white light against the surrounding darkness. A reference to Malvolio accompanied by her hysterical laughter indicates that she is perhaps participating in a rather experimental performance, in French, of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. She appears only as a tiny dot, and while we can hear the director whispering (one presumes it's the director — we can't see him, just as we can never see Haneke,[12] the director of the "outer" film we are watching). A trademark Haneke moment of paranoia is evoked in Anne's plaintive question at the end of this scene: "Is someone there?" [13]

14   Where Brunette sees experimental theatre, I would only see "Frenchness." From my point of

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[10] Though it must be underlined that it comes from a blog, which has of course no scientific authority; the opinion of an average viewer is nonetheless rather telling.

[11] URL: http://okinawaassault.wordpress.com/2010/06/30/robin-wood-code-inconnu-recit-incomplet/.

[12] While Peter Brunette writes that we can't see the people watching Anne during her audition "just as we can never see Haneke," Brigitte Peucker writes: "[…] in a very Parisian restaurant scene — and very briefly — we catch a glimpse of Haneke himself, barely in frame, his surprising presence left uncommented upon. Is there a connection? While Haneke's appearance is not a cameo in the usual sense, it evokes Hitchcock's insertion of a costumed self into his films. […] [T]he oblique reference to Hitchcock is to a controlling director, one noted for his cruelty to actors. Another sequence features Anne at an audition, this time for a role in *Twelfth Night*. In this scene Anne is on stage alone, uncostumed, a spotlight blinding her while the rest of the theater is in semidarkness. At the end of her monologue, Anne awaits a reaction from figures we only dimly perceive, whose whispers we barely hear. Anne stops speaking, hesitates, then asks: 'Is there anyone there, perhaps?' Yet another unseen director has generated fear in a performer" (Peucker, Brigitte. "Games Haneke plays: Reality and performance." Ed. Grundman Roy. *A Companion to Michael Haneke*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 130-46 [134 & 139 for *Twelfth Night*]; also in *On Michael Haneke*. Ed. Brian Price and John Davies Rhodes. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010. 15-34.

[13] Brunette, Peter. *Michael Haneke*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010. 81.

view, the character's performance is consistent with the role of Maria when she has just seen the cross-gartered Malvolio. I regard it as a very difficult exercise in hilarity, or fake giggling. She is actually laughing so hard that we may wonder whether she is pretending or not, and her laughter is infectious. To corroborate the intuition that both Juliette Binoche and Anne are doing their best, we can turn to a short passage from an interview conducted by James Lipton when he invited Juliette Binoche on his famous programme "Inside the Actor's Studio." [14]

Juliette Binoche Reciting Molière Video (0:55)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4qjnykBbeI

She plays Shakespeare and Molière in ways that are similar [15] and this *is* the comedic "tone" French people are used to hearing.

15   Furthermore, the audition scene needs to be compared with two other scenes from *Code Unknown* to be fully understood. First, with another audition, for a film this time, in which the difference between fiction and reality (or rather the passage from one to the other) is clearly blurred:

Thriller Audition Video (4:22)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1sfZmyQmkw

The beginning of the acting is not clearly specified so that, although we are 90% sure that the actress is performing, doubt still remains, almost as if we were suddenly watching a snuff movie — which would not be unlikely considering Michael Haneke's propensity to depict murders, suicides, torture in a very graphic and realistic way. [16]

16   The comparison between the two audition scenes is striking. The film audition is shot with close-ups and plays with reality and fiction. The theatre audition on the other hand is filmed at a great distance, both physical and emotional. But in both scenes we find ourselves manipulated: in one, we find it difficult to tell right from wrong; in the other, we are left expectant, waiting for an explanation that never comes. We may wonder who is speaking because we can barely see her face, wonder which play she is playing and why, and why the people in front of her don't react.

17   Secondly, there is the following scene…

Two lovers in a swimming pool   They realize their child is in danger

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[14] Episode 9.2 (27 Oct. 2002).

[15] Mirthfully, in a voluntary artificial almost "ham-acted" way, which nonetheless is subtly effective and eventually wins an audience over. The intonations of her voice (lower than normal) are very theatrical, and sound similar to each other.

[16] As in *Funny Game* for instance.

He is about to fall off a very tall building   They save him but…

Postsynchronizing Session Video (0:44)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Rhhs_zrpOI

… A scene which the spectator naturally considers as belonging to the diegesis before realizing that it is a scene in a movie for which the actress is doing voice-dubbing or postsynchronizing.

18   These two examples prove how good the actress is supposed to be ― the manipulation would not work if we understood that she was playing all along. And the multiplicity of contradictory interpretations of the scene stem from the fact that Haneke won't tell us what to think or how to respond. That is why the Shakespearean allusion in *Code Unknown* is particularly revealing or emblematic of Haneke's method: it is open to a variety of possibilities. As an audience, we are too often used to being told what to understand. Haneke gives us doubt, because we are apparently free to think whatever we like, although my point is that we are also manipulated and/or misled into following wrong paths, hence the possibility of contradictory receptions.

19   III. *Une leçon de cinéma*

In many ways, *Code Unknown* constitutes an example of Haneke's vision of cinema, almost a lesson. Every single scene presents long take shots which are characteristic of his style and his interest in realism and apparent objectivity, and which also inevitably command the viewer's technical admiration and respect. Haneke explained why Binoche had to be an actress in the film: for the sake of verisimilitude. She is somehow playing *herself* ― or another version of characters she has played in previous films. Allusions to Binoche's career inform us about the way Haneke plays with a cinephilic audience. He deliberately echoes other films in which she starred. Tellingly, she is also called Anne in a number of other films [17] including her breakthrough role in *Rendez-vous*, as well as in her second film with Haneke, [18] shot five years after *Code Unknown*. The swimming pool scene obviously constitutes a reference to Binoche's most famous French-speaking role: the bereaved wife and mother in *Three Colors: Blue. Blue* is the story of a woman who has lost her husband and child in a car accident. The film shows her very often going to the swimming pool.

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[17] *Rendez-vous* (André Téchiné, 1985): Anne Larrieux; *The Night is Young* (*Mauvais Sang*, Léos Carax, 1986): Anna; *Damage* (*Fatale*, Louis Malle, 1992): Anna Barton; *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996): Hana; **Code Unknown (Michael Haneke, 2000): Anne Laurent**; *In my Country* (John Boorman, 2004): Anna Malan; *Hidden* (*Caché*, Michael Haneke, 2005): Anne Laurent; *Disengagement* (Amos Gitai, 2007): Ana; *Sponsoring* (*Elles*, Małgorzata Szumowska, 2011): Anne.

[18] *Hidden* (2005).

Both posters

Bleu

So when, in *Code Unknown*, we suddenly see Binoche surrounded by the same blue element, and about to witness (perhaps) her child's death, it certainly rings a bell. Haneke undeniably plays with us on different levels: we take for granted that a scene belongs to the diegesis because it offers a familiar image ― and incidentally, we are led to believe that the character has a new lover, and has had a child (so that potentially, there's been a several-year ellipsis)… only to realise that we have been fooled, because the scene was mere fiction. The postsynchronizing scene finally reveals that Anne is really having an affair with her co-star – another scene of uncontrolled giggles (but not fake this time, not part of a performance) which echoes the audition scene, and is equally convincing.

20   If we then resume the analysis of the audition and its Shakespearean reference where we left it, we have to insist on the fact that references are superimposed in the scene: *Twelfth Night* is merely one of the many allusions to be found there. Another major echo here is Juliette Binoche, also playing an actress called Anne, also auditioning for a Shakespeare play, but in André Téchiné's *Rendez-vous* (1985). [19]

Romeo and Juliet **Audition Video (1:42)**
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LzFGEqmHsw

The audition scene in Téchiné makes it clear that Anne is a really bad actress this time, thanks to a comparison with another audition before hers which is greeted with enthusiasm (although not really convincing either ― again, reception matters more than performance itself). Binoche very conspicuously recites her lines unconvincingly and the reaction shots leave no doubt about the jury's opinion.

This is probably the key to the audition scene in *Code Unknown*: the absence of reaction

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[19] Delord, Frédéric. "André Téchiné's 'Shakespearean Trilogy'." *Op. cit.*

shots. Here is the answer to why it is difficult to know what to think about the audition: we are, like the character, left on our own, without any feedback. Haneke won't allow complicity.

21   "Good acting" or "bad acting" does not, it appears, lie in an actor's performance itself. It is rather made clear by the reaction of the people attending it. [20] Still, it is probably easier to define the quotation in *Code Unknown* through what it doesn't mean, rather than by exposing what it probably does signify. A legitimate question would be: why Shakespeare then, and why *Twelfth Night*?

22   It is probably the longest quotation from *Twelfth Night* in a French film, but constitutes a kind of exception within our database, for it was apparently chosen because it was difficult for a French audience to identify it ― and to some extent, not that easy for the average English-speaking cinemagoer either. Hence, the Shakespearean allusion is really meant to lose us here, and certainly not to reassure us, as it might in other cases. Interestingly, it may have the opposite effect for a more learned English-speaking audience, which finds something familiar to cling onto. But that is definitely not the effect that was sought. Indeterminacy is rather what was aimed at here.

23   The quotation is emblematic of Haneke's method. He won't make things easy for the spectators and he will certainly not take them by the hand, although he is, through Anne, addressing us. Beyond the screen, we are suddenly led to judge Anne's performance, in the dark, as though we were members of a jury ourselves. But my contention is that it is a temptation we ought to resist. Being judgmental of her performance, in terms of quality, is not our role. The film is precisely about lack of compassion, lack of communication, the feeling of not being understood… So a comment on the audition scene which derides the actress is getting hold of the film by the wrong end. A humiliating scene like the audition should attract our sympathy, shouldn't it?

24   The opening sequence presents a beggar, Maria, whom a young man "uses" like a dustbin. And in the audition scene, in the blink of an eye, Anne/Maria who wishes to humiliate Malvolio becomes the actress humiliated by a silent director. The purpose of the scene is to create discomfort. As the name of Maria is not mentioned in the scene, though, only *Twelfth Night* "aficionados" can draw a parallel between Shakespeare's Maria and Haneke's Maria, both figures of humiliation in the film (we should recall at this point that, in a scene shot in the subway, Anne also gets spat on by a teenager).

With such a deconstructed, fragmented plot, answers are to be found in the blanks, in the unsaid. Which indeed leaves plenty of room for the spectator.

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[20] See the famous audition scene in *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeevxJaJl1U>.

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