SLIDE 1

PRECARIOUSNESS IN THE FRAMES OF WAR: DYNAMICS OF A SENSATE COSMOPOLITICS

An “affect-oriented” reading of Haneke's *Code Unknown*

I. THE THEORY

Let me outline at the outset, briefly, this paper’s major goal, which is to articulate i) Judith Butler's notions of precariousness and precarity, with ii.) Michael Haneke’s 2000 film *Code Unknown*, the first of this Austrian director’s French productions. I will suggest that Judith Butler’s notion of vulnerability helps to isolate those moments in the film that, within the failed instances of recognition that the film underscores, function as potential sites of emergence of a collective body politics.

My interest in reading this film through the lens of Butler's positions is to take issue with some potent critiques that disparage it as conservative and arrogant with regard to its depiction of multicultural societies, as caught in the vicious cycle of resentment and contempt. I will argue that the film exposes the characters’ vulnerability, rather than indifference.

Butler proposes a social ontology, rooted in the idea that lives are precarious. As she explains a life is livable only if its necessary bodily dependency on the other, its precariousness, finds conditions of sustainability. Butler’s ontology is social because no life can be thought to live in isolation, no identity can ever be conceived as discrete or fully sovereign, lest powerful normative frameworks are mobilized in the service of nation-states that defensively and violently claim their invulnerability or mastery that they must prop up against the precariousness of others, severing the ethical and political bonds of interdependence. For Butler, the problem of liberal democracies is that liberal
democracies rely in the first instance on political dynamics of recognition. But, according to Butler, this will always only allow those already visible subjects—indeed human individuals recognized as such—to be part of the deliberating demos. Only the visible—not the ungrievable—will be those few who can come before the law, so to speak. For Butler then it is paramount to expose the normative framing that, especially in times of war, blocks the “sensate” disposition towards apprehending precariousness so as to block the possibility that it be acknowledged as the precondition of recognition.

Key here, for the purposes of this paper, are first the “frames” of war that in critical times for democracy themselves can become vulnerable, and be exposed; and, second, the fact that human life depends on un-chosen external conditions; that we are all bound to live in unwilled spatial and temporal co-habitation with others, which yield to violent but also promising social dynamics of power.

Butler’s social ontology develops from her earlier critique of a sovereign subject, a critique she now redirects towards an analysis of sensate cosmopolitics in the global age of precarity and war on terror. Thinking of a heterogenous and fluid (but far from harmonic) global civil society composed of ek-static subjects, that is, of subjects attuned to their reciprocal yet asymmetrical vulnerable and porous boundaries, becomes the premise for Butler’s radical democratic politics.

As social beings, Butler writes, these plural, indeed agglomerate, subjects are corporeally pre-disposed to respond, hence to responsibility. Responsibility emerges and manifests in the practice of a response to violence that refuses to sever the ties to the other’s precariousness. These lives that come to be—become—in the hands of others “can”—are
able-- to act on the apprehension of human precariousness even when this sensate responsibility is constrained by the frames of war that first reduce the sensate body to just vision, and, second, habituate the gaze to not see when seeing.

The fantasy of sovereignty derives to both subjects and states from the disavowal of one’s own co-dependence, obligation, and hence responsibility. Such entrenchments in mastery implicate states in the destruction of those unrecognizable abject lives “elsewhere”, and in the depletion of the social infrastructures, the political structures, and the natural environments that are necessary for the sustainability of all life on the planet. Destruction then morphs into nation building, and the frames of war revamp civilizational and colonial agendas for the non-democratic export of an oxymoronic democratic rule.

Frames must circulate to gain hegemony, as Butler writes, and their circulation or iteration means that re-signification is always possible. Breakages can thus occur. How frames of war and heightened precarity are “in place” first and second how they can be wrecked or wreck themselves, exposing their act of framing, and the demand for a just distribution of precariousness in the unwilled conditions of co-dependence and cohabitation that living means, constitutes the core of Haneke’s film.

II. THE FILM

First a brief summary:

Haneke’s film presents 45 incomplete scenes of life separated by 2-second long black leaders that sharply cut the frames. Often speech is clipped. The scenes are fragments of 5 main characters’ stories, whose lives variously intersect, in Paris. Anne, an actress,
encounters Jean, her boyfriend George's younger brother. Jean harasses Maria, a beggar of Romanian origin. Jean fights with Amadou resulting in the arrest of Amadou and Maria, who is deported to Romania. The story ends in the same location where it had begun, with Maria, Georges and Anne walking the same streets unbeknownst to each other. Amadou's little sister is deaf and mute, and we see her and Amadou together both at home and, importantly, as members of a group of other deaf-mute children.

SLIDE 2 (Children): The children appear at the very start of the film and provide the external frame of the film, the frame that frames all frames. They are first seen engaged in a game of charade: a girl offers a pantomime that elicits the children's guesses. Then the children appear in two drumming acts, and finally one child ends the film again with a pantomime The answers that the children as spectators and 'actors' in this “social game” propose are: “Alone”, “Hiding Place”; “Gangster”; “Bad Conscience” “Sad” “Imprisoned”. Each guess could serve, alone or together, as the interchangeable titles to the scenes the film subsequently presents. They could describe the agglomerate of feelings, situations, conditions in which the characters are caught, and that connects them all, each in a different way, with different effects. No “individual” answer can be found, and we, the viewers, are left to “look for one” or more in the course of the film.

Second, the ANALYSIS:

The ARGUMENT:

While the film does not present a happy multicultural society, I argue that the violence that pervades the various scenes leaves behind an affective trace –on the characters, and on the viewers--a trace that circulates through the frames and manifests in timid words, gestures of affection, in moments of “regard” and the force of which resists and breaks
with the frames of “war” in which the characters are held captive. The film also forces the viewers to confront the failing of their own “ethical”/normative frames when taking stock of the actions presented. Such normative frames, unlike the affective apprehension of generalized precariousness and the fundamental “political” obligation that derives from the ability to respond to vulnerability, do not transport from frame to frame. The film positions the viewer to evaluate how ethical decisions do not originate in abstract principles that presuppose autonomous and formed individuals but, rather, from practices of unchosen cohabitation that are lived unequally and unjustly by plural and situated subjects. The deaf and mute children who gather in a non-deliberative mode, namely in bodily play, translate that submerged affect into a performative shared language of gestures, vocalizations, and music. **SLIDE 3 (DRUMMING)**

If the scenes of the film variously illustrate the children’s guesses in the first game of charade; in the film’s denouement, questions are asked that add on to the guesses: “Have you ever made anyone happy?” “Is it so hard to tell him you love him?” “Is it true”? “How would help her to know?” and “What can I do for you?” These questions, that --whether the characters answer them or not-- linger on and haunt the viewer, are finally re-collected by the deaf and mute children’s incessant drumming that now accompanies the film’s last sequences, and overrides the “black leaders”. With the closing pantomime, the film explicitly throws these questions back at the audience, with an injunction: that it, as a plural body-collective, keeps drumming these questions out, in a concerted effort to keep looking for the unknowable answers, and thus to keep exposing and apprehending vulnerability in the search for a more just world.
Three points make up my argument:

1. The main tenet of the argument is that the film shows that the frames of war that require and work to produce the subject as a closed and autonomous identity do not fully contain that very subject’s ability to apprehend vulnerability as a necessarily shared condition for life to be sustained, one that entails an obligation to the other that is intrinsically socio-political.

2. The film shows how precariousness is differentially (according race, gender, class) distributed in the equally heterogeneous formation of the characters/subjectivities. Hence the film presents characters whose ‘choices’ cannot be interpreted as ‘individual’ and autonomous but rather as the effects of their interdependent becoming. While the film first isolates the character’s every action into distinct frames/scenes, thus eliciting a moral reading of each event as relating to that character’s decision; I argue that thanks to montage the individual stories or scenes come in fact to be made of the lives of others with whom the characters cohabit in unchosen conditions, of precariousness. Thereby the characters emerge as always engaging in ethical practices of responsibility that are “social” – coalitional-- and bound to be political.

3. The affective trace that is the price paid for acting “strong”, indifferent, distant – as sovereign subjects—re-surfaces and manifests as bodily gesture and language of care, for example laughter, tears, caresses, embraces, and a word of thanks – a simple yet profound “Merci”-- that inaugurates a burst of tears. These expressions of the sensate body cut across the armored body of each and every character, jump the boundaries that
divide the frames to be finally re-collected and performed without mastery by the vulnerable bodies of the deaf-mute children at play, in assembly and in public.

Let me look at just a couple of scenes to briefly make these points:

**UNJUST DISTRIBUTION OF PRECARIOUSNESS**

**SLIDE 4:** The film’s “story” starts with a 7 minute tracking shot in which Jean does “not” apprehend the beggarwoman, Maria, as recognizable subject: she remains invisible –not a life--to him. Jean is a captive of the normative frames of war, activated in conditions of precarity. Only through Amadou’s sudden entrance into the frame, his breach of the frame, does Maria come into visibility: she does not only forcibly appear to Jean, but also for the first time to the viewers. Following Jean’s movements, in the tracking shot, the viewers find they have implicated themselves in re-producing the frame that “denied” Maria visibility. However, her emergence into our field of vision, as well as that of the public gathering around her, does not mean that Maria gains recognition – hence that she can claim “the right to have rights”, to be protected by the law. She turns out to be an “illegal” immigrant whom the police arrest and subsequently deport. Her vulnerability is acknowledged only to be brutally “normalized” by laws that unevenly decide and distribute citizenship, hence belonging. Violence is perpetrated both in the act of recognition’s disavowal of recognizability that thus is not sufficient, and in the beggar’s unjustly conditioned hope to be returned to invisibility.

**SLIDE 5:** Amadou, whom some critics have judged as acting righteously, arrogating for himself the role of “avenger”, in fact exposes here his precariousness and makes himself vulnerable in a racialized society. Jean answers his address only to immediately disavow
both Amadou and his request: Jean asks him: and WHO are YOU? Indeed: who is this you that with this "demand" / obligation breaks the frames of invisibility to which some are chastised but not others? How is he– Amadou– recognized, interpellated?

SLIDE 6: The police take him into custody for causing the brawl. And they do so violently. The viewer is left wondering: how would have Jean reacted had it been one of the white bystanders to ask Jean to apologize to Maria? Or what if it had been Anne? How would “I”–a viewer– read the unfolding actions, then? Would they even unfold the same way? Where does my judgment come from?

... AND THE TRANSITIVITY OF AFFECT

SLIDE 7 [AFFECT TRANSPORTS]: 5 scenes later, Maria is deported. The four scenes between her arrest and her deportation connect through bodies and affective objects: for ex. the maimed bodies of war casualties [SLIDE 8], right after Amadou’s violent arrest, and an uncut loaf of bread that Jean and his father, back at the farm, do not share [SLIDE 9]. Maria is then shown boarding a plane with businesspeople, tourists, and the usual cosmopolitan “globe-trotters,” those citizens of the world, with whom, Maria, the vernacular cosmopolitan, must share her unwanted journey [SLIDE 10] It is not Maria who cries, however but, in the next scene, Amadou’s mother [SLIDE 11] She becomes the receptacle of Maria’s desperation. In turn this mother’s despair translates into the loud screams of a child, Anne’s neighbour, who is possibly being beaten behind closed doors. She’s never seen, she will die. [SLIDE 12]
**CROSSING OVER: HERE and THERE; THERE AND HERE but mind the difference**

Finally, Maria arrives home. Unfinished Houses –including her daughter's that her labor contributes to build– are filmed in a long tracking shot during which Maria and a neighbor exchange “good” migration stories. The sustainability of life –the social life of affective bonds- in this “here” depends on the sustainability of life out “there,” a sustainability which was denied to Maria, in Paris. Proximity and Distance are revealed as reversible yet unequal: in Rumania, Maria’s life is grievable, she has been missed, she will be missed; there, in Paris, she is invisible among the visible. The unfinished, open homes that expose their interiors are a reminder/remainder of the precariousness of the body exposed in unchosen and unjust conditions of precarity.

Given more time, I would analyse the intersections of two crucial moments in the film that involve a conversation on the ethics of (war) photography; and the intervention (or not) in a case of (possible) child abuse. In my view, the two are intertwined in ways that show how ethics rests in a practice of affective relationality and dialogic action that cannot but involve political responsibility.

In lieu of this analysis, however, I will conclude with a cursory reading of the crucial final scene that precedes the film’s ending.

**SLIDE 13:** This scene is the chiasmus of the film’s start. Here too three characters interact, in a situation of injury. Jean morphs into an Arab youngster who harasses Anne: she is another Maria; an older Arab man, in a moment of rage tries to trip the boy who spat in Anne’s face and then stands up and faces the youngster’s rage. He is a novel
Amadou. Each character cathexes the energy/pain of their respective others in the beginning, and through them of all characters, situations, places and spaces, thereby crossing age, gender and cultural identity dynamics that are too often played as barriers, in the frames of war. Here this symbolic crossing forms provisional alliances in the exposure of shared –reversible yet asymmetrical—precariousness. (Anne will only re-collect Maria, as it were, from a privileged position. She is not Maria) In standing up, handing over his glasses to Anne, the Arab man refuses to act making a claim of non-violence that first issues from the apprehension of a generalized condition of precariousness and second can be registered by others. This claim is not a “peaceful state”, as Butler writes, but a social and political struggle to make “rage” effective. In standing up and out of the crowd, the Arab man breaks the frames of war that are constituted in vision, split off from the sensate body. Significantly the man takes off his glasses, anticipating violence –whence his civil courage. He hands them to Anne, and then stands up. A new kind of vision arises from the body that touches the other. In standing up and passing the glasses to her who will hold them, without possibly “use” them, this character without a name gains a sensate vision a “framed” vision: he becomes the anonymous, non-sovereign, associational subject of a plural mobile collective on its way out of the dark. And so we are led back to this film’s frame of frames that breaks the frames of war.

I hope this paper has shown how Butler's notions of precariousness help to isolate those moments in the film that, within all the failed instances of recognition that the film underscores, function as sites of emergence of a sensate cosmopolitics in action.

THANK YOU!