

CACHÉ AND THE SECRET IMAGE

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Abstract: Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005) is a psychological thriller in which a Paris family is haunted by past repressions. These repressions are of both personal and national orders. What distinguishes *Caché* is its ability to draw our attention to how visual information is produced, and what it means to be a witness. This paper considers the film's pursuit of a revelation towards an articulation of historical guilt – its interest in accessing the 'secret'. That secret is an image.

“The system can face down any visible antagonism. But against the other kind, which is viral in structure – as though every machinery of domination secreted its own counter-apparatus, the agent of its own disappearance – the system can do nothing.” (Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*)

“How is it possible in 1961 to have 200 people dead in the Seine and nobody talks about it for years and years?” (Michael Haneke, “The Making of *Caché*”)

Paranoia will soon consume an enclosed and elite Paris family in *Caché*. He, Georges Laurent, is the host of a popular television talk show of the kind where guests discuss the private life of Rimbaud. She, Anne Laurent, is an editor with a publishing house of the kind that prints titles on globalisation and new media. This is erudition in a sense that is typically French, coupled with an apartment that submerges signs of its own affluence -. blue shades into grey and grey into white. A teenage son, Pierrot, takes swimming lessons at school. Money powers this life, but like many things in Haneke's film, it is artfully *caché*, or hidden, such is the tasteful adult world that enfolds us. “We're all very busy,” Georges tells his mother, “and that's about it.” And then, like Pierrot's hormones brewing in the room upstairs, the long gestating past erupts onto the scene of the present.

At the doorstep one evening: an unmarked videotape in an anonymous plastic bag. It is a record of nothing more (and nothing less) than the house's exterior in the morning. The tape runs for over two hours. “Maybe it's one of your fans”, she muses. Since it stares squarely at the doorstep, where inside ends and outside begins, it is not an invasion of privacy. It is a record in that sense of routine, mundane, public lives: Georges leaving; Anne leaving; cars and cyclists passing. Nonetheless, the tape is a vigorously encroaching form in its brazen looking, all the more vexing for issuing from an invisible apparatus. When a second tape repeats the trick, Georges and Anne go to the police, who refuse to intervene until “he torches the house or sends [them] bombs.” Thus is prepared an exercise in creeping hysteria. Haneke assembles units from psychological thrillers and horror films only to utterly transform them. Nuclear families abandoned by the police usually rally together to counter awful visitations from the past and find themselves rejuvenated in the process (*Fatal Attraction*); instead, *Caché* exposes the family as thoroughly pulverised. And while horror

frequently trades in the clandestine, the hidden fact, only to dispatch it with the destruction of a tormentor (Halloween), Haneke's coup is to telescope the repressed into an overt rendition of national genealogies. A secret rises to the surface in *Caché*, its head breaching the slick of bourgeois calm. The secret is an image.

Secrets, Evelyn Keller writes, "function to articulate a boundary: an interior not visible to outsiders, the demarcation of a separate domain, a sphere of autonomous power." There is obviously a relation of the unknowable to regimes of visibility and authority; the repressed is that which is banished from sight, from speech and (if the repression is entirely successful) from recall. The first repression in this film, and arguably at the heart of it, is a night in the October of 1961. Under the supervision of Maurice Papon, as many as 200 FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) supporters were massacred by the French police, some tortured and executed in secluded courtyards, many simply dumped unconscious into the Seine. This repression of a peaceful demonstration is in itself repressed, with no official confirmation on the size, scale, and nature of the police operation. No one is ever prosecuted for the massacre, and in 2001, a timid plaque - and one thinks of Rosa Luxemburg's puny citation on that bridge - appears on the Saint Michel Bridge indicating, very politely, the chilly fate of those who went over it forty years ago.

Caché grafts this shadowy Paris night on to a secret story with the arrival of a third tape. These are shots of the "house [he] grew up in" with his parents, Georges tells Anne, a mansion serviced by "Algerian farmhands." Among these farmhands is a couple that disappeared after the October massacre, leaving behind a son named Majid. Georges' parents, feeling "personally responsible" for the young boy, plan to take him in. These plans, however, fail to materialise, and within a few weeks Majid is sent to an orphanage. Why this happens we are not informed, but, like Anne, we expect an unhappy explanation. "If it was over a teddy," she remarks, "he wouldn't want revenge 40 years on." Thus emerges an embedded tale of betrayal and forgetting in which repression is refracted out of a Paris apartment and into the watery graves of the Seine. Majid's "pathological hatred for my family" is the only way for Georges to understand his "campaign of terror," and his desire "to wreck my career...to wreck our lives." On the ever present TV in the Laurent's living room, there is a "demand for greater openness" in Iraq; in Israel, the claims of the dispossessed modulate into acts that can only be termed 'terrorism'.

Personal stories, we observe, bleed into the daunting open field of social crises, and often borrow their vocabulary, unfolding (literally) against a millennial backdrop of international watchdog pronouncements. *Caché* exposes the muted hysteria of endless policing by inverting the asymmetry of the apparatus. Moroccans, Tunisians, sometimes Spanish and Italian immigrants were confused with Algerians in Papon's Paris 'cleanup'. "It is a technical feature of the surveillance camera," John Fiske suggests, "that enables it to identify a person's race more clearly than his or her class or religion, but it is a racist society that transforms that information into knowledge." Indeed, the pristine image in *Caché* ostensibly elevates the visual into a site of pure intelligence. This is Michael Haneke's first outing on high definition, a format which renders every moment a perfect composition, every sight, including those on videotape, an exhilaratingly uncontaminated frame. And yet the grammar of the film frame itself, Laura Mulvey reminds us, is an anachronism, a holdover from celluloid. With the move from analogue to digital, home video swarms in a virtual pool of binary code, or abstract data, so that a once-dominant principle of equivalence (movie on screen = reel in tape) is thoroughly abolished. Further, home video technologies ransack the linear coherence of film, en route producing altogether new ways of seeing. We witness a powerful instance of this with the arrival of a fourth tape, which relays a journey down an unfamiliar street and into an unknown apartment building. What could have been a baffling cul-de-sac turns magically into

an object of irradiation, one which generates new information and unpacks itself in the right hands. By rewinding it, by pausing it and by running it slower and faster, the Laurents vandalise the semantic integrity of the tape. In the process, *Caché* makes the inevitable transition from being a film about repression into one about investigation, motored by the involution of the classic detective story.

Details read off the tape lead Georges down the corridor of a typically neglected HLM¹ building, and into the decrepit apartment of a man we learn very quickly is Majid. "Tell me what you want!" Georges demands angrily. "Nothing" the reply comes. Not only does Majid deny ever having made the tapes, his alleged "pathological hatred" of Georges never reveals itself. This is a man racked by sorrow and ruin. He is Georges' secret. Georges once tells his parents Majid coughs blood. "I was six," he explains to Anne, "I was a child; I didn't want to share my room." When his parents refuse to believe him, Georges has Majid chop the head off a cock in the shed of the country house. The next day, Majid disappears.

Majid is not a perpetrator of violence; he is the veritable product of it. He is the legacy of Papon. He is Algiers come to the metropolis. He is the child of night, which an HLM building hides. He is the past making first contact with the present. Majid is the shored up debris of History. His is the doomed offer of redemption, as *Caché* takes a gothic swerve away from the daylight. A late 1950s innovation took the struggle for Algiers out of the Casbah and into the metropolis. Now, the blood of those condemned, we suspect, is everywhere, pumping through the avenues of the French capital: behind those white walls, beneath those Persian rugs. It spurts and splatters with objectless malevolence. It devours the world. It stains our hands while it aims for our eyes. The plunge into darkness begins with the end of the transparent image.

I argued earlier that the pristine visual gestured toward a coronation of the seen as a site of pure intelligence. This would make the narrative image world a gift that is given to us, when in fact the deployment of high definition photography is an instructive sleight of hand. Consider the way the movie begins: a conventional and highly ordered view of the exterior of the house that doubles as establishing shot and credit roll template. It is in both senses an inauguration: of a story that takes place here, i.e. a narrative, and of an artefact summoning the work of practitioners, i.e. product. It is the rightful and reverential origin of a film. But as the credits disappear and the shot fails to dissolve or cut, we realise it is a sham beginning. Eventually, a voice emerges on the soundtrack, but it is not the 'Once upon a time...' voice of masculine clarity, confidence or wisdom. It is a woman's word of interrogation: "Well?" she asks. The Laurents have already been watching for a while. Thus is confounded the ontological status of the image in *Caché*; we are never quite sure if the film is ours. It explicitly comments on the production of footage, not only through the videotapes but also, for example, by taking us to a seemingly 'live' recording. We think we are on the set of Georges' TV show, with him and his guests, until one participant is frozen midway and we know we're in the studio in post-production. Haneke loops us in and out of video with such fluency that the sacrality of the original, of what is real, is hopelessly vexed and gradually liquidated. The film privileges (but does not fetishise) the image, repeatedly substituting visual experiences for material ones.

Second order sights from memories and dreams to drawings and tape proliferate in *Caché*, radically expanding the range of the representational while diminishing the potential for viscerality. With boundless nihilism at his disposal, Haneke has blasted us back into Plato's cave of shadowplay and third removes. So when Majid invites Georges back to his apartment saying "I called you because I wanted you to be present," we are wholly unprepared for what is to come; live-ness has so long ceased to be a threat in *Caché*. What could Majid need Georges to be

present for? Suddenly, in “a flash of lightning” as Benjamin says, “the Then and the Now come together into a constellation.” Majid slits his own throat; he coughs blood. It is an act of violence so unbelievable we hit rewind. Haneke coaxed us into a false ontological order. We are now ripped out of it, it is too real to be true. It gushes from the veins of a lonely suicide terrorist. It sprays on to the cool blues of *Caché*. It is elemental surplus in an otherwise reserved and meditative film. “The real is super-added to the image like a bonus of terror,” observes Baudrillard of the falling Twin Towers, “not only is it terrifying, but what is more, it’s real.” This is the viral irruption of the awful irrational into bourgeois life. “Because white violence discourse understands all violent acts as irrational,” Jane Gaines argues, “it is unable to comprehend the rationality of social outbreak, particularly outbreak that is the product of an accumulation of oppressive conditions.” This incomprehension promises nothing if not an identical, and perhaps intensified reproduction of those oppressive conditions.

Caché never ‘ends’; rather it cuts off arbitrarily, fulfilling Hayden White’s creed for a chronicle, “usually marked by a failure to achieve narrative closure. It does not so much conclude as simply terminate.” In a wide but dense take outside a school, we [almost don’t] see Pierrot and Majid’s son talk. Haneke’s parting shot is no final revelation but another secret, a hidden pact, what Benjamin identifies as the “secret agreement between past generations and the present one.” The visual, though overloaded with detail, fails spectacularly as intelligence, for we cannot hear the conversation. Who made the tapes? Only someone with unrestricted access, scopic and otherwise, could have pulled this off. He would have to be someone who “knows whatever happens the moment it happens,” simultaneously recording “everything that happens across the whole forward rim of the past...as it happens, the way it happens.” Such a person does in fact exist, albeit only in a historian’s imagination. Arthur Danto’s Ideal Chronicler is an impossible fantasy of disinterested omnipresence and infinite storage. He is a universal jukebox not of memories, but of eternal presents. No one is making those tapes. They are always already there, just waiting to be popped in.

You could say the apparatus is nowhere in *Caché* because it is everywhere. It is occluded from sight precisely because it is the instrument of sight, dispersed globally and shrouded in darkness. “Like the central tower guard [of the Panopticon],” Anne Friedberg theorises, “the film spectator is totally invisible, absent not only from self-observation but from surveillance as well.” The film spectator is the wrathful consumer to whom all images are addressed and to whom all images submit themselves. He watches from the cool, unlit shed of his indifference, not unlike a shed in that old country house, a neat outlook which is the only perspective on Majid’s agonising childhood abandonment. This archetypal traumatic scene is neither pure memory nor pure experience. It is only pure cinema.

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NOTES

¹ Habitation à loyer modéré, French for “housing at moderated rents”

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