

Hidden in Plain Sight: Bringing Terror Home

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In a world where turning a blind eye has become an art, Michael Haneke's 2005 *Caché* (*Hidden*) explores the ways in which being made to look—and to think—can be experienced as forms of terror. Both fascinating and profoundly banal, it is a film about waiting, and watching—and then not seeing what is right in front of you. The film's deceptively narrow depiction of a world of material privilege corroded by psychic unease opens up broader questions of the political deployment of fear and paranoid fantasy, and the dishonesties and displacements of post-colonialism. The film's narrative unfolds in a European city, showing us members of a bourgeois family who appear to have taken refuge behind the walls of their own home, yet who remain unable to shut out the past and their own feelings of paranoia and persecution. They see themselves as victims of a campaign of terror, which initially takes the form of video tapes pushed through the door. These tapes appear to show little more than the unexceptionable surface of their everyday lives, yet they serve to unlock a secret from the past, a hidden story of colonial suffering—and in so doing expose the structures of oppression and complicity on which their lives are built.

One of the ironies of the dominant critical response to this film in the UK and the US has been the attempt to limit its exploration of colonial culpabilities to its French setting. In this there seems to be a symptomatic acting out of the film's themes of displacement, avoidance and the refusal to look close to home. *Caché* forces us to think about what we allow inside and what we insist remains outside; the ways we psychologically, physically (and

legislatively) construct and imagine the idea of 'home'. What does it mean to construct a home as a place of safety, a refuge that shuts out the world, the past? What happens (on an individual and political level) when we invest in the paranoid fantasy of home as a fortress?

Certainly, both Georges and Anne are depicted, visually at least, as prisoners of their own making, or at least of their own circumstances—a message that is encoded in the film's use of setting and costume. The couple's stylish house is a gated fortress, a message driven home visually and sonically. The composition of shots of its exterior puts its vertical barred windows centre frame; horizontal bars cut across shots; and the iron gate clangs. Georges' and Anne's grey, shapeless clothes are reminiscent of prison uniforms, and have nothing of the chic glamour of outfits worn by French characters of their milieu in countless other contemporary films. These characters are shown literally behind bars, and bars, moreover, feature as part of the set of Georges' television programme (the chairs are encased in bars, and Georges is framed in bars when talking on the phone after taping). Some of the contributors to this dossier point out that the book-lined set of the literary programme mirrors Georges and Anne's home, in which thousands of books, flatly lit and lining the walls, figure as decorative objects. Lacking in volume, apparently two dimensional and with their titles obscured, these function more as blocks to the outside world than as prompts for meaningful reflection or exchange, new ways of looking. We also see the books piling up in the office of Georges's producer, who says he doesn't have time to read them. In this film, books cannot open up other perspectives or the past, because they are never opened. (They can only say 'nothing', one of the first words of the film.) On the TV set, the glass table around which guests chat

and sip water, as the books loom around and above them, is composed and shot to resemble to the family dinner table, suggesting that the 'reality' of Georges and Anne's life is, on some level, staged. When the outside world intrudes upon their carcereal existence, they attempt to banish it, just as Georges is shown editing out a discussion of the censorship of Rimbaud from his TV programme—even discussion of censorship is censored if it is not part of the preordained 'script'. At the dinner party that Anne and Georges host, Georges awkwardly breaks into a discussion of mutual friends to ask about a script, and when the subject is changed, he again attempts to steer the discussion back on to the script.

What is censored at the dinner party is a discussion of a friend's illness. It is mentioned that this friend, Simone, has been replaced in her husband's affections by a woman named 'Marianne', a name that Anne finds surprising (doubtless because it so transparently refers to the icon of French republicanism) and that is repeated three times to ensure that audiences make no mistake about its significance. Marianne is deemed to be very 'sympa', short for 'sympathique', or 'nice'. Through their dinner party banter, the group of friends has collectively shifted attention away from the ill woman, whom one of the characters dismisses as someone she was 'never very close to anyway', on to someone whose name invokes the French republican values of universalism and cultural integration, imposed legislatively, for example, by the banning of religious expression, such as the wearing of Muslim headscarves, in French schools. That which does not fit in, or which causes discomfort – vulnerability, need, difference - is banished from 'polite' (and political) society. The dinner party scene also comprises a literal shaggy dog story, which hooks its audience by means of a precise date (the only other

clearly specified date that appears in the film being Georges's citation of the police massacre of the Algerian protesters), and which suggests that historic events can come back to bite you, and can even, according to the storyteller, leave a scar. When someone asks if the story is true, everyone laughs, because that is not the point, just as the ontological status of the messages and the identity of the person making the videotapes in the film are not the point.

Instead this set piece dramatizes the complicity of the audience in the construction of its narrative, while its content exposes the way the past continues to haunt and to traumatise the present. The form of the shaggy dog story further encapsulates the experience of watching the film, raising generic and narrative expectations that audiences begin to engage with, which are then thwarted when they realise that this film is not the whodunnit they bargained for, despite its formal nods to thriller, family melodrama, and horror filmic conventions. After Georges witnesses Majid's suicide, the first place he goes is to the cinema, where film posters advertise the coming attractions: *Ma mère* ('my mother'—one of the adults responsible for sending Majid away), *Deux frères* ('two brothers', or Georges and Majid), *La mauvaise éducation* ('bad education'—what Majid's son informs Georges that Majid suffered as a result of being ejected from Georges's family home), and *Mariages* ('marriages'—the family melodrama hinted at when Pierrot accuses his mother of having an affair with her colleague), which seem to spell out the various domestic and allegorical configurations in which Georges is implicated, as well as the various narrative and generic routes that *Caché* as a film could have gone down. Again the shift from the depiction of Majid's suicide to Georges's emergence from the cinema raises complex questions of the status of the scene between the two men that we have witnessed. Their

first meeting shifts from a style of cross-cutting and multiple camera angles following their confrontation, to a replay of the encounter shot from the fixed position of the unseen camera recording the videotapes, marking an apparent distinction between the event's occurrence and its video replay. However, the scene of Majid's suicide is shown only from the fixed camera, seen through the eye of the unseen observer. Not only does this reinforce the film's repeated questioning of the status of the image—the nature and temporality of what is seen, the position and implication of the witness—it also lends a sense that Majid's act is historically and ideologically over-determined, forced into being by the representational power of Georges's fantasy, always already having happened.

Caché disrupts viewers' expectations from the very beginning, when we learn that we have not been seeing what we had previously thought. In part this disruption is effected through the construction of a mode of articulation and of narrative progression that constantly double back, overlap, and fast-rewind, disorienting the spectator. The extended opening shot (revealed eventually as the video footage of Georges and Anne's house) breaks cinematic conventions through the length of take, the static camera, and the increasingly insistent soundtrack of ambient noise. Already feeling uneasy, the viewer then sees the image freeze, speed up and spool forward. This questioning of the status of the image—both its temporality and its truth value—is repeated throughout *Caché*. The film insists on the need to look in different ways, and to listen. Georges' response to Anne's opening word—"Alors?" (So?)—"Rien" (Nothing)—is one that closes off inquiry and denies the possibility of meaning, and one that recurs at key points in the film (Anne and Georges's lines are reversed when the first drawing arrives; later the lines

are repeated in Georges's conversation with his mother). In place of other historical and psychological modes of exploration, Georges and Anne become fixated with where the tape has been shot from—in other words, its geographical point of origin. Throughout the film they show themselves to be adept at reading maps: they quickly figure out the location of what turns out to be Majid's building, and they even have a relief map in their bathroom, as well as an abstract painting snaking across their living room walls that looks as though it is charting the course of a long river. This is perhaps because boundaries are so very important to them.

In Georges and Anne's world, meaning is to be found on the surface: as Pierrot's swimming coach urges him, "Less depth!" and as Paul Gilroy notes in his piece here, the characters themselves are in many ways two-dimensional ciphers. But rather than read this depthlessness (particularly that of Majid) as one of the film's failings, we wish to suggest the possibility that it is being used as a diversionary tactic, like the adumbrated generic conventions that tempt and ultimately frustrate the viewer. In what is certainly the film's most self-conscious scene, in which Anne and Georges discuss Pierrot's disappearance while news of the Iraq War blares from the widescreen TV in the centre of the frame, the conventions of bourgeois melodrama and of classical realism compel viewers to attempt to shut out news of the outside world in order to focus on the apparent domestic crisis. The ease with which we fail to identify with (or even notice) real events, and the insistence we place on identifying with Georges and Anne, who are not particularly sympathetic characters and thus not easy to identify with, underscores the film's apparently perverse but ultimately effective interrogation of what John Berger famously called 'ways of seeing'.

The name of the street from which the surveillance of the house is conducted may indicate that there are other ways to read. The fact that the street from which the surveillance of the house is conducted is called the rue des Iris hints at an allegorical significance but, as with so much in this film, it opens up a variety of meanings. Clearly the dominant reference is to sight, as so much of the film's questioning of conventional interpretive strategies occurs on a visual level; but there may be a hint of Iris as the messenger goddess too¹. Above all, the iris motif gestures to the 'iris' as an organic or manufactured optical device. Much of the cinema of looking from *Rear Window* through *Peeping Tom* plays with the ambiguity of the eye as symbol: both looking out and shutting off the inside; penetrating yet vulnerable to penetration; an aperture to be opened and closed. Most of all it indicates the ways that the film is very much about opening one's eyes, and opening up the camera lens to new perspectives.

The most haunting perspective of all is the anonymous one that leaves us wondering just who is responsible for the videotapes. From whose unblinking viewpoint are we watching events unfold? Who is responsible for the crime? Just what is the crime, exactly? Who is the perpetrator, and who the victim? Georges's 'crime' as a child is very different from his crime as an adult. A six-year-old child cannot be held responsible (certainly not legally speaking, and for many, ethically speaking as well), for his actions, however selfish these might be, and his motivation—not wanting to share what he sees as his—is an ordinary if unsavoury childhood impulse. The child's 'crime' cannot, therefore, be mapped easily onto France's colonial history, but the adult Georges's refusal to acknowledge the effects of his earlier actions suggests a parallel with the postcolonial metropolitan who is neither wholly

responsible for, nor wholly untainted by, past events from which he or she has benefitted. The movements of history often transcend the role of the individual. This is why the question of 'whodunnit' is precisely the wrong question to ask of this film, and why viewers who insist on asking it are bound to be disappointed, because the individual cannot bear the full responsibility for history. Nonetheless, Georges's crime consists in taking this fact as license to absolve himself of all responsibility, protesting repeatedly, 'I refuse to have a bad conscience'. He refuses to engage with history on any level.

Caché plays with spectatorial complicity (are we in control of, or controlled by, what we see?), in order to explore the nature of complicity itself, and the interface between individual and collective responsibility. The film repeatedly breaks the bounds of the individual, using Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre' (I is another) as a point of departure for mapping domestic space onto social (civic, or national) space. By contrast, cinema's dominant model of representing terrorism concentrates on its spectacular manifestations, leaving its causes marginalised. As such it mirrors a political discourse that demands that we read acts of terror as coming from nowhere and signifying nothing beyond the 'evil' of those who commit them. *Caché* both participates in and dramatizes the mediation between collective agency and the sets of structures in which individuals live, operate, and turn a blind eye to what is going on around them. This blindness manifests itself in the midst of the post-spectacular, media-saturated society of surveillance, in which 'onlookers' routinely overlook their own responsibility as witnesses. For it is in this that the 'campaign of terror' against Georges consists: being made to look (at drawings, at video footage, and ultimately, at himself).

The final scenes where we see Georges would appear to indicate that we are shown a character refusing the demand to see and to remember. He closes the heavy curtains of his bedroom, having taken two sleeping tablets (*cachets*, pronounced just like the title of the film). However the scenes that follow suggest greater ambiguity. The tantalising ending of the film can be read equally as a paranoid fantasy—Majid’s son and Georges’s son have conspired to make the tapes—or, as Max Silverman suggests, as a utopian fantasy—the next generation can work together to begin to undo the wrongs of the previous generation. Either way, Georges and Anne’s son, like Majid’s son, will depart from the assumptions and practices of his parents’ generation, a departure that is prefigured narratively when Pierrot goes missing, and decoratively in the family home, when Anne confronts Georges about his lies while standing before three brass elephants of varying sizes, a mother and father separated from their child.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Majid’s unnamed son seems to possess a social mobility denied to his father. While Majid only leaves his apartment when forcibly removed by the police, his son takes his questions to Georges at the television station. In this institutional centre of French cultural life he enters unhindered, moving across a series of thresholds where Georges attempts to stall him: the lift door, the inner office, even the lavatories. Majid’s son is shown to be able to challenge Georges’s actions and his refusal to face the past and his own responsibilities.

For Georges is not only made to see, he is also made to listen. In the film’s opening shot of Georges and Anne’s house, we hear what is apparently the ambient sound of birdsong. This birdsong seems at first to be little more than noise, in the way, perhaps, that the television broadcasting news of world events, including the occupation of Iraq, at first seems like ‘noise’

competing with Anne and Georges's increasingly frantic dialogue about their missing son. The French word for white noise is '*le parasite*', appropriately suggesting the invasion of a host, which is also invoked when Majid invites Georges into his home to watch him commit suicide (though in an inversion of the figure of the immigrant as 'guest' in debates about postcolonial 'hospitality' currently raging in France), and again in Georges's claim at the film's close that he may have caught a virus. What initially seems like white noise, however, turns out to be very significant. The birdsong from the film's opening shot is identical to the birdsong in the penultimate scene, the flashback to George's boyhood home when the young Majid is taken away by force; in the farmyard we see chickens but we hear sparrows. In fact, the soundtrack in these two scenes sounds the same (including feet crunching and the slamming of car doors) but for one thing: Majid's screams have been removed from the opening shot. When Georges replays the scene in his mind's eye at the end of the film after having witnessed the adult Majid's suicide, he finally allows himself to hear the violence of the past, which manages not only to break through the birdsong, which becomes louder and louder, but also breaks through Georges's own psychic barriers. The cries Georges hears may also be interpreted as an expression of his own feelings—not the pain of victimization, which belongs solely to Majid—but the shame of having suppressed the memory of Majid's cries, and his own role in eliciting them. The cries in this scene not only show the leakage of the past into the present. They also remind us that while collective responsibility creates the possibility of the avoidance of guilt, shame – that intense, hidden, individual emotion - can reconnect us to that guilt. Shame has the power to animate history and to reveal to us our part in it.

ⁱ In Greek mythology Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, carries messages to humanity from the gods communicating to the human plane from the non-human.

ⁱⁱⁱ We wish to thank Mark Brownrigg for this observation, and Tom Arah, Myra Macdonald, Stephanie Marriott, and Bethan Benwell for illuminating discussion of the film.