

Ambivalence and Displacement in Michael Haneke's *Caché*

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Caché: Cinema as Trauma

In his review of Michael Haneke's 2005 film *Caché*, critic Roger Ebert (2007) declared that the film succeeds "precisely because it leaves us hanging" (Ebert 2007). Ebert was referring to the manner in which the film's storyline remains unresolved, since the main characters, Georges and Anne Laurent, never discover who is responsible for sending disturbing videos to their home. These videos offer an eerily straightforward, eerily focused taping of the family's life. Some indulge a voyeuristic impulse to stare long and hard at the Laurents' townhouse, situated on a quiet Parisian side street, where they live with their twelve year-old son. Very little happens in these visual chronicles executed with steely precision: occasionally there is a passerby, or a car en route, or someone emerging from a building. Other videos take us to different parts of Paris, and even to the home in the country where Georges grew up. The steady, silent gaze of the unknown cameraman is chilling, and its unwavering presence suggests a hardened intention.

More videos, even more disturbing, begin arriving until the Laurent family is truly terrorized. One video again records the street where the family lives, this time accompanied by a childish drawing of a face spitting blood. The monotony and quiet of these recordings, along with their unwavering focus, allow everyday

events to assume an uncanny quality, as though the camera were intent on capturing a lurid underside of the Laurents' daily life. Importantly, the viewer of *Caché* begins to see similarities in the filming style of the videos: i.e., in the distance of the camera, the front-and-center angle, the fact that the camera never moves. The videos all seem to be the work of one pair of eyes. But whose? And what is the secret that they are trying to unveil?

As the film unfolds, we begin to understand that the unblinking gaze focused on the Laurents in fact reveals a dimension of the surrounding society at large. Just as the unknown filmmaker seeks to disclose something hidden – *caché* – about Georges Laurent, so does Haneke aim at disclosing a dimension of contemporary French society that, to many, remains hidden. And that hidden dimension is the imprimatur of trauma. Both the film itself and the videos that make up its storyline unmask the frequently disguised, frequently buried trauma of a colonial past whose scars go unseen, but which can be observed by the discerning eye. Intent upon the present, these videos bear witness to a traumatic colonial heritage, and to the scarring trauma of an ongoing postcolonial condition from which the nation as a whole has not yet healed. Through the story of the Laurent family recorded in *Caché*, we thus encounter a microcosm for a larger cultural malaise that permeates French society -- and by extension, all societies that claim a colonizing past.

Trauma is defined as experience which, because of its disturbing content, cannot be integrated into life's larger narrative. It is a deeply unsettling experience that does not mesh with the storyline into which it is supposed to fit.

Trauma is thus often experienced as flashbacks that the individual cannot integrate into his or her life's trajectory, given that their upsetting nature so contravene the person's sense of self. In E. Ann Kaplan's (1999) words, it remains "unprocessed":

Trauma is characterized by a collapse of symbolizing ... (It is) usually experienced in the form of images in a flashback or a nightmare ... (that) cannot be grasped cognitively, and assigned meaning. Rather, it remains unprocessed...not "knowledge" in the usual sense (Kaplan, 1999, pp.146-147).

Periodically throughout *Caché*, we are presented with fragments of "unprocessed" memories that haunt Georges as a grown man, memories all connecting back to the French-Algerian War. Georges grew up during this war, and in those years his parents employed an Algerian family at their home. This family had a young son named Majid whose parents were killed during the Parisian massacre of October 17, 1961. When Georges's mother made plans to adopt Majid, the news did not sit well with six-year old Georges who, out of jealousy, rivalry, covetousness, and fear, saw to it that the adoption never took place. He invented tales: Majid was ill, Majid spit up blood, Majid needed a children's hospital and not a new home. Now tormented by this scurrilous effort to keep the foreigner out so as to not partition the native son's blessings, Georges has troubling flashbacks. And in keeping with the nature of trauma, these flashbacks are never fully integrated into the storyline of *Caché*. They appear out of nowhere. We see Majid and Georges as boys in a shed; we

witness Majid killing a chicken; we find Georges coming upon Majid who sits alone, coughing. Charged with meaning and emotional weight, these scenes appear at random, disrupting the storyline without clear indicators of what they mean. In Kaplan's (1999) words, these intrusive scenes represent "cinema and/as trauma," an excellent medium for encoding "the specific trauma of colonialism, itself a major component of modernity" (Kaplan, 1999, p.148).

Although the question of who is making the videos is never fully answered, far more important to *Caché's* thematics is the disturbing reality -- what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms the "transgressive and transitional truth" (Bhabha, 1994, p.113) -- that the videos reveal. This is the disturbing reality that what lies buried in the postcolonial setting is the ability to invalidate the very premises of colonial rule in the first place. Here, this "transgressive and transitional truth" is the guilty contradiction contained in Georges' unwillingness as a boy -- and indeed as a man -- to share the culture that he so promotes. It is the contradiction contained in his unwillingness to extend the privileges of French society to the formerly colonized, despite the fact that such unwillingness flies in the face of colonialism's first principle regarding the superiority and desirability of French civilization. Georges may well believe this principle, yet he has not practiced it vis-à-vis one Algerian seeking entry into his club.

It would be hard to describe Georges as flatly xenophobic or racist. He is a highly cultivated and cosmopolitan person, as his book-lined home indicates. An educated man with a visible profile, he is the host of a literary talk show on French television which features conversations about books, authors, and literary

themes. Like his wife, he is an avid reader with his ear to the ground regarding political events, cultural trends, and intellectual currents. Yet in many ways, Georges is an advocate specifically of French high culture, a person who defends, promulgates, transmits, and sustains the qualities of French civilization of which he is so proud. Thus his few smiling moments occur almost exclusively during the filming of his show, as his guests engage in lively intellectual repartees on such topics as the homosexuality of Arthur Rimbaud. These conversations among French literati bring out the best in him and put a sparkle in his eye. "Happy reading," states a beaming Georges to the camera as his show concludes one day, "and thank you for your widening support" (*Caché*, 2005).

An emissary of French civilization, Georges has not facilitated that civilization's reception amidst the country's numerous émigrés. The shifting demographics of French society, with its increasingly visible immigrant population, thus triggers enormous guilt in him, and forces him to recall the traumatic events that alienated his would-be brother. Such an unwillingness to share French culture, to spread French wealth, to extend the affections of French parents to the colonized Other thus gives the lie to colonialism's pretense at a universally desirable, universally acclaimed culture. It exposes the problems that often accompany a purportedly all-embracing humanism, one that advances the Enlightenment as a truly universal philosophical movement while denying European privilege to an orphaned Algerian. It gives the lie to *liberté, égalité,*

fraternité as a universalist refrain when in practice brotherly love is withheld and access to French society is denied.

Georges and Majid: “a Neurotic Orientation”

Behind the televised smile that Georges offers to his literate audience, we thus discern the corrosive residue of the colonial setting. Both he and his would-be brother were caught in the destructive irrationality of the postcolonial setting and subsequently shackled by the identity assigned them. In the words of Frantz Fanon (1967), colonialism delivers a pathological disposition, for “[t]he (dark-skinned) enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation” (Fanon, 1967, p.60). To be sure, one of the most profound insights of Fanon’s analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks* is his observation that neither colonizer nor colonized escapes the damage wrought by the interlocking suffering of the colonial condition. Colonialism establishes a deep and neurotic symbiosis between the races which is as inescapable as it is unhealthy; against the backdrop of a supposedly civilizing mission, it sets in motion a *folie à deux* whose insanity lingers. Long after decolonization has occurred, each race continues to define itself in terms of the other in ways that ensure a dehumanized existence for both. Thus there is no racial identity -- no “Algerian” experience, no “French” culture -- apart from the identity that emerged within the colonial setting. That setting’s attendant pathologies guarantee the colonizer’s guilt, while simultaneously ensuring the colonized’s struggle to approximate the colonizer’s norms. The two

are inextricably locked in “a neurotic orientation” (Fanon, 1967, 60) just like the “two chairs stuck together” (*Caché*, 2005) that Majid observed on Georges’s talk show.

Thus within the narrative of *Caché*, both colonizer and colonized, French and Algerian, carry scars from the past over an adoption that never took place. France’s current relationship with its immigrant populations might be viewed in a similar light, as it is struggles to come to terms with the violence that always accompany colonialism’s paternalistic stance. This violence is indeed slow to recede as dramatized when Georges, upon visiting Majid’s home for the second time, is made to witness the latter slit his throat. The splattered blood that covers the wall and floor establishes a clear connection with the blood reportedly spewed by Majid as a child: what Georges perhaps invented as a child – the story of Majid spewing blood -- is now painfully real. A permanent link is thus forged between the two men, the would-be brothers, forever locking them into the neurotic orientation that characterizes colonialism’s painful legacy.

Of course, one of Fanon’s central aims in writing *Black Skin, White Masks* is to “help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment” (Fanon, 1967, p.30). Such an emancipatory agenda obviously relies heavily upon the time-honored humanist concepts as freedom, the sanctity of the individual, truth, and self-determination. It is an agenda that reveals its indebtedness to the tradition of the Enlightenment and to the ideology of the Rights of Man as these have inspired countless movements of liberation steeped in identity politics. “I am my own foundation,”

(Fanon, 1967, 231) Fanon writes in a gesture that bows to the triumph of Western humanism and eighteenth-century philosophy.

Yet Bhabha maintains that such deference to humanism is merely a façade intended to cover over the deepest insights of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Such insights go straight to the heart of humanism's failure, and dare to admit that invocations of time-honored categories in fact undermine and undercut their privilege while unraveling the mendacity of their claims. Indeed, a study of colonialism's neurotic orientation would be incomplete without recognizing how that neurosis exposes the inauthenticity of colonial premises: it exposes the falsehood of "race" and ethnicity, of national identity, of country and cultural enclave as categories to which we can cling for deep and abiding meaning. The profoundest truth that colonialism delivers is thus the vulnerable, contingent, evanescent quality of these categories over which wars are fought and countless lives lost. According to Bhabha, Fanon seems aware of this deconstructive premise contained in the very articulations upon which colonial power resides. He seems to understand, often without fully articulating it, that even the humanism he so respects is, at bottom, a misconception. Because human identity is far more tentative than the humanist tradition will admit, our moment of truth arrives only when we recognize the insane underside of the rational exterior upon which colonialism relies. Fanon's bold assertion that "[t]here is no Negro mission; there is no white burden," (Fanon, 1967, p.228) may therefore be his best, for it exposes the extreme ambivalence of colonial relations and the pathos

of colonial violence. “The Negro is not. Any more than the white man” (Fanon, 1967, p.231).

Race relations especially unveil the limits of humanism, such that under current conditions the Black or brown body stands as a reminder that the Enlightenment’s mission cannot be proclaimed a success given that persons of color have now come to stand for the troubling underside of the enlightened episteme. The dark body – thanks only to colonialism’s disturbed logic and disturbing legacy – invokes insanity, inhumanity, and irrationality. Recalling “the extreme ambivalence inherent in the colonial situation” (Fanon, 1967, 83), it has come to denote the uncivilized antidote of the colonial mission, the inhuman underside of the colonizer and the irrepressible side of the colonized. The dark body is therefore not the other of the European or the American, but “the Other” of us all, the insane, untamed side of us that is refractory to the claims of humanism. It is the stranger and the strangeness in us all, cast in this role by the very forces that believed in the universalizing mission of Western culture. This casting may be why Fanon, trained as a psychiatrist, resigned his position at a military hospital. He realized that persons scarred by colonialism’s deep neurosis and profound brutality could not re-acclimate to a world claiming to display the common sense, rationality, and humanitarian qualities of Western enlightenment. Bhabha (1994) explains:

The analysis of colonial de-personalization alienates not only the Enlightenment idea of ‘Man’ but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge...The

Black presence ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress, a place for the *Socius*... (Bhabha, 1994, pp.114-115).

In keeping with this logic, the hidden secret alluded to in the disturbing videos that torment Georges is as much the secret of identity's ambivalence and ready displacement as it is the untold story about an adoption that never took place. For according to Bhabha, the reality of the formerly colonized presence signals the frailty of colonizer's identity: here, the Algerian is the "Other" contained in France's *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and stands ready to displace its meanings and unsettle its tradition. The Algerian reminds the former colonizer of identity's implosion, and thus "ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood" (Bhabha, 1994, p.115) upon which the colonial setting rests. Georges's unwillingness to accept tentativeness and frailty in the culture that he so reveres only adds to the trauma he already experiences. In this way, Majid's reentry into his life not only causes a past trauma to resurface, but brings into focus another, more insidious trauma that formulates before Georges's eyes: France is changing, and he cannot emotionally integrate those elements that run counter to his understanding of what his country means to him. Unassimilated into the whole, these elements retain the character of trauma.

This may be why the camera work of the mysterious video maker so resembles Georges's troubling dream at the end of the film. Home in bed,

Georges dreams of that moment in which he hid in the shed outside his childhood home and watched Majid being taken away. The latter, still hoping for the adoption, goes reluctantly, and even tries to flee. Yet he is forced into a car and taken away to a life of underprivilege. Georges's dream has all the qualities of the videos sent to him: the distance of the camera from its subjects, its front and center angle, the fact that the camera never moves. The eyes in the dream seem to be the same pair of eyes making the videos. Is it possible, we wonder, that *Georges himself* is making these videos and sending them to his home and work in an act of self-torture? Is this yet another layer of secrets that he keeps hidden? On a rational level, this is an unlikely explanation which doesn't appeal to common sense. Yet the fact that Georges's dream shares all the qualities of the videos suggest that he *is*, in an utterly illogical, irrational sense, the producer of this story – even if only on an unconscious level. *He* is the purveyor of the “transgressive and transitional truth,” the one aware of humanism's failure who thus experiences trauma in a manner that cannot be assimilated. The Other of Georges, of Majid, of France, and of ‘Man,’ this possible yet insane explanation ensures that this story has a deeply irrational side to it. Like colonialism itself, it makes a mockery of Western humanism and takes us to the other side of reason. Mindfully, deliberately, and artfully, then, this film makes no sense. Roger Ebert is right, no one should try to explain *Caché*. It succeeds precisely because it leaves us hanging.

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