

‘You never look at me from where I see you’: Postcolonial guilt in *Caché*

James Penney, Trent University

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On 17 October 1961 French-based leaders of the FLN (*Front de libération nationale*), the political wing of the main Algerian anticolonial group, organised a peaceful demonstration against an 8:30 p.m. curfew imposed by police on ‘Muslim French Algerians’ in the Paris region. An estimated 30,000 people, mainly of North African origin or descent, assembled at the event. By this late stage of the Franco-Algerian war, all but the most delusional among both the *pied noir* community and their metropolitan supporters had recognised, without of course accepting, that the Algerians had sided decisively with the revolution and would refuse to lay down arms until all remnants of the French administration had been ousted from national territory. Tensions between police and France’s Algerian population had escalated sharply during the preceding year.

Overwhelmingly invested in the idea of a French Algeria, the forces of order had looked upon President Charles de Gaulle’s efforts to smooth over relations with France’s North African population ahead of the Evian negotiations that would lead the following year to formal Algerian independence as a subversion of their authority and an outright betrayal of the republican interest. Shaken by a record twenty-two deaths at the hands of FLN activists in nine months, police had mounted a campaign of harassment and humiliation against French Algerians. That murderous October night saw the culmination of this campaign: 12,000 demonstrators arrested and between 50 and 350 killed. The fact that the bodies of most victims were thrown into the Seine, many never to be found or

acknowledged on the public record, explains the shock value of these estimates, which can be qualified without overstatement as wildly divergent.¹

The prefect of the Paris police force at the time was none other than Maurice Papon, the notorious French administrator who died in February 2007 while serving time for crimes against humanity. Papon's record of public service presents a shameful litany of racist and reactionary administrative sadism. As Secretary General of the Bordeaux region during the second world war's collaborationist Vichy regime he authorized the deportation of 1690 Jews to the Drancy internment camp. As prefect of the Constantinois region of eastern Algeria during the war in that country, he oversaw the brutal suppression of numerous anticolonial demonstrations. And in 1962, less than a year after the massacre of the previous October, Papon instigated another deadly police attack, this time in Paris' Charonne metro station in the aftermath of a Communist Party-organized demonstration against the OAS (*Organisation armée secrète*), the *pied noir* guerrilla operation that had been terrorizing both the Algerian insurrection and the Gaullist forces sent across the Mediterranean to effect decolonisation.

Papon was also the figure most directly responsible for inaugurating an alarmingly systematic program to destroy evidence of France's effort to erase its colonial crimes from the historical record. After the 1961 massacre, for example, he blocked attempts of Communist and Socialist National Assembly members to strike a commission of inquiry. Numerous books and documentaries on the tragedy were censored, a practice which continued on French public television and radio until 1981. It was not until 1991 in fact, a full thirty years after its occurrence, that the tragedy began to generate full-scale media

coverage. Rather ironically, Papon generated this new interest himself when he filed a defamation case against historian Jean-Luc Einaudi, who had published a book on the incident based on eyewitness accounts and FLN documents (he had been barred from consulting police archives).² Papon filed his suit after a statement signed by Einaudi appeared in the Parisian daily *Le Monde* on 20 May 1998. This statement affirmed that a ‘massacre was perpetrated in Paris by the forces of order acting under the orders of Maurice Papon’. In 1968, 1974 and 1982, on this last occasion under socialist President François Mitterrand, the French National Assembly passed legislation handing out official pardons, revoking criminal penalties, and rehabilitating officers and generals who had been indicted for offenses during the war years in Algeria. Only on the occasion of its fortieth anniversary in 2001 did Bertrand Delanoë, Socialist mayor of Paris, commemorate the massacre with a plaque on the St-Michel bridge. Still refusing to acknowledge France’s lingering postcolonial shame, rightist members of Paris’ municipal administration boycotted the ceremony in protest.

Now in Michael Haneke’s acclaimed 2005 film *Caché*, Maurice Papon’s name is mentioned only in passing.³ Yet as an icon of the phenomenon of willful historical amnesia in its specifically French manifestation – but what nation’s identity is not defined in its essence by such acts of selective memory? – Papon casts a redoubtable shadow over the film, more specifically over Georges Laurent (Daniel Auteuil), its central protagonist. For clearly the character of Georges is meant to figure as a kind of bourgeois intellectual everyman; he is *Caché*’s personification of liberal middle-class guilt over the nasty symbolic and physical violence of France’s still under-acknowledged colonial past. The film depicts in pitiless detail the manifold strategies by means of which

Georges attempts to exonerate himself for an act of childhood selfishness which returns from the past to disturb his smugly comfortable and conspicuously passionless adult existence.

The theme of the troubled postwar conscience is no doubt an over-familiar one in cinema. Yet *Caché*'s take on it is original, I will argue in this paper, because it explores the psychodynamics of postcolonial guilt as they are made manifest in the specific arena of the field of vision. In other words, what *Caché* has to offer is an ingeniously *cinematic* take on a subject that Hollywood, of course, has exhaustively explored in the context of Vietnam. To the puzzled consternation of many of its viewers, *Caché* objectifies the return of the colonial real in the form of a gaze, a gaze indexed by videotapes left anonymously for Georges on his doorstep. These tapes contain images shot from a camera the status of which is eminently paradoxical. Both included within and banished from the film's diegesis, this camera torments Georges with memories of his childhood, memories that we see in the form of harrowing flashbacks or dream sequences. The video footage is also the film's principle means of creating suspense: it incites our desire as viewers to solve the perplexing enigma of its 'impossible' hidden camera.

Equally importantly, Haneke's ingenious device presents a felicitous occasion to revisit the conceptualisation of the apparatus in cinema theory. In addition to exploring the visual dynamics of France's lingering colonial guilt, my reading of *Caché* will aim at rectifying film theory's problematic engagement with Lacan's concept of the gaze. Further, it will decry the wide-scale regression of cinema studies as a discipline into *technologicism* – an approach that abstracts the cinematic apparatus from its imbrication

with the subjective function as psychoanalysis defines it.

Before considering how Haneke introduces his viewer to the film's visual problematic, however, it will be helpful to provide a plot summary for those who have not yet seen *Caché* and those others whose recollection may be in need of refreshing. The aforementioned Georges is a successful Parisian television personality who shares a chic Parisian home in Paris' quaint (and expensive) Cité florale quarter with his wife Anne (Juliette Binoche), a book editor who has just published a successful work on globalisation, and Pierrot, their sullen pre-teen son. Habituated Haneke viewers will recognize these proper names that recur in many of his films, names which collectively signify the alienated insouciance of the postmodern European bourgeois family. Georges hosts a popular literary talk show of the kind that seems to exist only on French public television. He begins to receive the videotapes – the first of the front of his villa, shot from down the facing street; the second taken from a vehicle approaching his mother's countryside estate – in envelopes which also contain postcards exhibiting disturbingly bloody childlike drawings. The film cues us to suspect that Georges knows more than he is letting on to his wife, who becomes increasingly exasperated by her husband's evasive responses to her inquiries about who could be responsible for the anonymous harassment.

As viewers we gradually piece together that Georges's parents were on the verge of adopting the son of an Algerian couple in their employ as farmhands who had fallen victim to Papon's suppression of the 1961 Paris demonstrations. Instead, as a result of Georges's lies and manipulations, they reluctantly decide to send the boy, Majid, to an orphanage. (Georges persuades Majid, for example, to decapitate an unruly rooster which

he falsely claims his father wants killed.) We hear Georges mention Papon, together with the date and most summary of descriptions of the massacre, as he finally divulges to his wife his growing conviction that Majid is the party responsible for the tapes. Two points should be gleaned from the screenplay's shorthand reference to the tragedy. First, we are expected already to be at least superficially aware of the 1961 event, as well *Caché's* French audience would generally be. Second and more importantly, however, the casually dismissive tone of Georges's remark signals that no further thought in this connection is required. As soon as the memory of France's colonialist nastiness, and by extension Georges's own, is brought to light, it is urgently to be swept under the rug. The allusion to the massacre, notably the only one in the entire film, works as such references generally have in French cultural discourse for nearly half a decade. It is mentioned only to be jettisoned like a bad object from the collective psyche; periodically conjured like a ghost in need of appeasement to circumvent a further, more disruptive haunting.

Georges eventually succeeds in tracking Majid down to a characterless, run-down housing project (HLM – *habitation à loyer modéré*) in Paris' eastern suburbs only to witness him forcefully deny any involvement in the fabrication and delivery of the tapes. Later, no longer able to tolerate the continued harassment that, very much in the spirit of the times, he brands an act of 'terror', Georges returns to Majid's apartment to issue a spasmodic threat. This climactic confrontation is suddenly interrupted, however, when Majid brandishes a knife and slits his own throat, gruesomely splattering blood across the wall behind him as he collapses into a lifeless heap on the floor. Georges, shocked into befuddlement, quickly exits the apartment whereupon, through a brief long shot depicting him exiting a multiplex, *Caché* makes a point of showing that our hero has responded to

his trauma by going to the movies. Some time later, Majid's son appears at Georges's workplace, exacerbating the acuity of George's crisis of conscience. We see Georges for the last time as he returns home, visibly shaken. He proceeds to take two sleeping pills (*cachets*), draw the heavy curtains on his bedroom windows and crawl naked into bed.

The film then cuts to its final two takes. The first is the ultimate single-shot flashback/dream sequence depicting Majid's forcible removal from his would-be adoptive parents' home. The second is the much commented-upon final image: a long shot of the steps leading up to the entrance to Pierrot's school. Though we have seen this view from this same angle before, when a worried Georges had come to pick up his son at school after receiving the first videotape, the repetition now comes with a difference. This time, just before the final credits begin to roll, the discerning viewer can observe but not hear a brief conversation between Pierrot and Majid's son which takes place on the left hand side of the frame. Though this perplexing final shot has unleashed something of a speculative critical frenzy – is it a utopian vision of a reconciled postcolonial future or the hint of a barely plausible conspiracy marking a half-hearted attempt at narrative closure? – the film, perfectly deliberately it seems to me, withholds any and all satisfying explanations as to who shot the video footage and how.

We are now finally in a position to examine how the film introduces its viewer to the enigma at its diegetical core. A detailed analysis of the opening sequence will allow me to set up how *Caché*'s hidden camera is best viewed as an exemplary cinematic rendering of our encounter with the gaze, as this term is understood in the precise Lacanian sense. From there I will relate Lacan's distinction between geometrical and visual paradigms of

space to the theoretical regression, as I see it, which has taken place in the film studies discipline during the last two decades or so.

To get us started, recall that Lacan defined the gaze as the visual mode of *objet petit a*: the absent or missing, indeed *hidden*, object-cause of desire. The gaze is thus the means by which the partial object manifests itself in the field of vision as an ambiguous ‘absent presence’. *Caché* opens on a static image of a comfortable residential Parisian street: rue des Iris, the observant viewer can read. Though the geographical context suggests that the reference is to flowers, in a film as concerned as *Caché* with the psychopolitics of vision, we note that the name cannot occur by chance.

The view frames a short segment of this narrow, sunny street at the end of which can be discerned the Laurents’ three-storey villa, the first storey of which is entirely ensconced behind generous foliage. Shortly we will see the character we will come to know as Anne emerge from the premises. Prior to this moment, however, we witness the opening credits slowly scroll across the screen, effectively superimposing lines of barely legible text on the image, which remains conspicuously immobile. Only the gait of a passing pedestrian and the singing of unseen birds disclose that what we are looking at is not a still. From the outset, the film in this way cues us as spectators to become aware that we, alongside Georges and Anne, are literally reading images – perfectly ordinary images that are nevertheless imbued, in their paradoxically subjective objectivity, with an anxious hint of the uncanny. Further, it will retrospectively become apparent that what we are looking for as we read is evidence of a hidden desire: the desire of the unknown other who, we will soon piece together, has left these tapes on the Laurents’ doorstep.

When the credits disappear, the image of the streetscape remains for what seems an inordinate, art-cinematic length of time. There is little significant movement: Anne leaving the villa, a soft breeze coursing through the manicured tree in front, a cyclist careening towards us up the street. Finally we hear a conversation in voice-over between Georges and Anne as the film cuts to a shot of the same villa, but from closer and at an angle. The cut, together with the voice-over dialogue, allow us to deduce retrospectively that the previous image of the streetscape was in fact video footage, footage that the characters have also been watching, though we will not actually see Georges and Anne in front of their television until the sequence's conclusion. From this second, askew perspective we watch Georges leave the villa to investigate the location down the street from which the footage would have been shot. 'He must have been there, no?' he comments. *Caché* then cuts back to the surveillance footage, to which we have been, after a fashion, retroactively sutured.

Though we recognize, in other words, that we have been watching this footage from Georges's and Anne's perspective, we are also made aware that the look represented belongs to the other, as yet anonymous, agency that has set up the surveillance camera, an agency strongly reminiscent of what Peter Wollen, reading the work of Jean-Pierre Oudart during the long-lost heyday of film theory, called 'the Absent One'.⁴ This term for Wollen designates the agency situated outside the image at the point of the dramaturgical 'fourth wall' that defines the image as 'discontinuous', constituting it thereby 'as [a] signifier' and rendering the absence that may then be filled by the mechanism of suture, that is to say the linking through an edit of a particular shot with the point of view of a

character, through whom we as viewers thus perceive the shot.⁵ What this means in the present context is that *Caché* is organized as an inquiry into the identity of Wollen's absent one; the identity, that is to say, behind the film's uncanny 'subjectivity' at those 'objective' moments when we are not witnessing the action through a point of view included in the story. After we witness the video image fast-forward – the footage lasts two hours, we hear Anne say in voice-over, and Georges wants to see himself leaving home for the day – we see Georges walk up the street towards us, passing right near the camera's location, the locus of our look as spectators. Rewinding and then pausing the videotape at a moment when he is looking straight ahead at us, Georges says of the missing cameraperson, 'How I didn't see him is a complete mystery.'

These words prove prophetic, for after Georges dismisses the possibility that the footage could have been shot from inside a car or residence, further speculation about the camera's mysterious location suddenly vanishes from *Caché*'s set of concerns. Later, when he is sent a videotape of his confrontation with Majid in Majid's apartment, Georges does not bother to wonder why he failed to see a camera, does not speculate as to where it might have been hidden. Nor do the police, nor anyone else for that matter, show any interest in searching Majid's apartment for the mysterious recording device. It is as if Georges suddenly becomes accustomed to watching images of himself shot from invisible cameras; as if the film itself loses interest in the enigma that sets off and propels its own narrative. Of course, Georges remains eminently perturbed by the problem of who is responsible for the videos. The problem of *how* they were shot, however, is weirdly written off the agenda. If neither Majid nor his son is responsible for the footage, as they both rather convincingly insist, then someone else must surely be. Yet *Caché*

proves as indifferent to exploring alternative scenarios as it is in providing hints of insincerity or duplicity in its French-Algerian characters. In fact the opposite is the case: Haneke quite conspicuously directs the actors' performances so as to highlight their credibility and foreground their apparent innocence.

As one might expect, critics have spent much time expressing their perplexity about *Caché*'s enigmatic camera. Startlingly, however, the possibility that the mystery might be integrally related to the film's thematic has not been substantially probed. More fundamentally, the idea that *Caché* might force film theory to reconceptualise its idea of cinematic space has been left conspicuously unexamined. The general assumption would seem to be that *Caché*'s impossible camera is a mere conceit through which can be dissected, in roughly sociological fashion, the impact of France's repressed postcolonial shame on a 'normal' bourgeois family. Against this premise I suggest that Haneke's device is more significant than this dominant reading would imply. For as I have already intimated, the film's narrative incoherence – the notion that despite its conspicuous absence from the film's diegetic space the videocamera's material existence is logically integral to the story's intelligibility – is best viewed as an exemplary cinematic manifestation of our encounter with the gaze, which can also be characterized as an agency of vision that cannot be fixed to any particular look. Like *Caché*'s hidden camera, the gaze can neither be localized within the three dimensions of geometrical space – space as it is figured by the human imagination, that is – nor can its agency be 'subjectivised': linked, that is to say, to anyone's subjectivity or point of view. Georges's encounter with the surveillance footage parallels our encounter with the gaze in that in both instances the subject is made visible from a point, indeed a proliferating multiplicity

of points, that simply refuse to show themselves to sight.

One of the overlooked references in Lacan's discussion of the gaze is to French encyclopedist and materialist philosopher Denis Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* (1749), available in a relatively recent translation as *Letter on the Blind*.⁶ I propose now to spend some time examining this text to shed further light on Lacan's concept – which with alarmingly few exceptions bears little relation to 'the gaze' of film theory – and to consider how it relates to the videocamera's impossible location, to the space that the surveillance footage indexes, without showing, in *Caché*. This excursus on Diderot and the construction of space will further serve to prepare the ground for the ensuing critique of what I have called the ascendant technologicism at work in cinema studies.

Diderot's *Letter*, which landed him a term in prison, is a seemingly innocuous philosophical meditation on the nature and extent of the mutual implication of sense perception and knowledge. The discussion revolves around the reported testimonies of two historical blind men: the first the patient of a certain Prussian ophthalmologist named Hilmer, a patient whose congenital cataracts had just been operated on and who had been thereby restored to sight; and the second the eighteenth-century Cambridge mathematician Nicolas Saunderson who, despite being blinded at age one by measles, went on to make significant contributions to geometry, optics, and the theory of vision. It is to Saunderson, for example, whom we owe the proof that the volume of a pyramid is

equal to a third of the volume of a prism of identical base and height. Now how is it possible for the congenitally (or nearly congenitally) blind mentally to represent spatial relationships? What are the consequences of this phenomenon for the way we conceive of the impact of sense perception on the forms of knowledge? These are the main questions that Diderot poses in his remarkable study.

The letter's latter sections see Diderot address them by way of a discussion of the implications of an old problem first formulated by the Anglo-Irish mathematician William Molyneux and made famous by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).⁷ Will a person blind from birth, having learned to distinguish through touch between two metal objects, one a cube and the other a sphere, be capable, after acquiring the sense of sight, of identifying the two forms strictly through the visual faculty? The question had become freshly significant by the mid-eighteenth century when, due to the development of experimental surgical techniques, it had become possible to explore this scenario empirically. Diderot disagrees with both Molyneux and Locke, arguing against his philosophical precursors that through her sense of touch a congenitally blind person can perfectly well, through careful application of the intelligence, mentally figure three-dimensional forms. Though not strictly dependent on them, such cognitive work can be facilitated by techniques such as the one perfected by Saunderson, who inquired into problems of geometry with the help of threads of silk fashioned into regular shapes held in place with pins stuck into a wooden board to form a Cartesian grid.

After a brief period of perceptual adjustment, Diderot argues, the subject blind from birth

but then restored to vision will indeed be capable of distinguishing between the cubic and spherical objects without touching them. This can be explained by the fact that the mental representation of geometrical space does not depend on sight. Generally speaking, Diderot's *Letter* is a statement in support of a particular, indeed idiosyncratic, non-empiricist materialism, a materialism that leaves room for the relative autonomy of the idea. Yes, Diderot admits, human intellection is strongly conditioned by sense perception, but not absolutely so. The subject is capable of abstract thought which is not already thoroughly conditioned by either the data of the senses or their mental reconstructions. This partial independence of the idea from its sensory substrate is what allows the blind person to conceptualize geometrical space without the input of vision. It also explains why significant advances in optics and geometry could have been made by a man who had been blind virtually from birth.

Now as far as Lacan is concerned, the significance of Diderot's meditation is that it demonstrates that geometrical space and visual space are not the same thing. The field of vision cannot be reduced to the abstract three-dimensional volumes through which we seem conditioned to imagine it. You cannot account for the agency of the gaze within the framework of classical optics, more specifically, because this tradition inquires into the behaviour of light within a set of conical spatial figurations that are constructed geometrically. Consequentially for cinema studies, Lacan associates the hegemony of geometrism with the function of images, a function defined, he says, by 'a point by point correspondence of two unities in space'.⁸ Thus the *diegetical* space of cinema – cinematic space, I here mean, abstracted from its incorporation by the apparatus, and more specifically by the spectatorial function – is consonant with the space of classical optics,

what Lacan refers to as geometrical space. Whether the ‘correspondences’ of which Lacan speaks are held to link the geometric points on an object placed before a mirror with the points constituting its virtual reflection, or else the points of an image on celluloid or in pixels with the points of its projected analogue on the screen, they constitute a system comprised of an infinite quantity of the straight radiating lines on which rays of light historically have been viewed to travel. This is the same ideational system that governs the laws of classical perspective, laws that had already by Diderot’s time witnessed their full elaboration during the Renaissance in the work of Vignoli, Alberti and Dürer, for instance.

Yet precisely because light for the human imagination travels in straight lines, its conception does not depend on the actual perception of its spatial medium. For Diderot this is proven by the experience of the blind geometer, for whom even the concept of perspective is therefore potentially intelligible. Further, as Saunderson’s innovation shows, a beam of light’s trajectory can be represented by the extension of a length of silk thread available, of course, to perception through the sense of touch. These examples explain why Lacan chooses to extricate our understanding of light from its geometrical figuration in classical optics. Counterintuitive though it may sound, the agency of light in the visual field for Lacan does not belong on the level of geometrical space. The blind person is sheltered, *protected* from light which, for the seeing, can be *blinding*, can even damage or destroy the ocular apparatus. Though light illuminates us, in other words, we make ourselves both psychically and physically vulnerable when we try to look at it directly.

Drawing perhaps from lessons in ocular anatomy received during his medical training, Lacan remarks that even segments of the surface of the eye's outermost layers that play no role in vision are photosensitive. This means that for the organism the eye's sensory faculties play a defensive role that extends well beyond the protection of the retinal wall against overexposure. There is something about light, in other words, that signals danger to the whole body, setting off a fearful, involuntary neurological response that threatens to immobilize us in terror or fascination. Psychically, light is what renders us a spectacle in the world. The difficulty, however, is that it illuminates us from a point which is inaccessible to perception. In consequence, this unfixed point that perception cannot localize wields the power to overwhelm vision, to subvert perception's ambition to situate the self reliably in space. Put differently, the light of the gaze makes us visible in a way that ruins self-perception – our desire, that is to say, to see ourselves from where we wish to be seen. It is in this sense that we can say that the gaze *shames*: Though undeniably the gaze makes us aware of our visibility, we cannot see ourselves, we are rendered invisible, from its inconceivable vantage point. 'You never look at me from where I see you', says Lacan, giving voice to the anxiety of the subject confronting the gaze.⁹ Because the sense of our own visibility cannot be identified with the look of any particular other, the gaze quite literally *expropriates* our situation. It inserts us into the world in a way that deprives us of the ability to see ourselves where we are.

The parallels with *Caché* immediately become apparent. I have been arguing that a direct analogy can be drawn between the geometrical space that Lacan sees constructed by classical optics and the diegetical space that the cinema constructs: the space of narrative film. The ingenious gesture of *Caché* is therefore that it *includes within its diegesis* the

insubstantial, spatially immaterial excess of the gaze that for Lacan differentiates the field of vision from the space of geometrism. Crucial to note, however, is the fact that it does so only *negatively*, in the form of an absence – the videocamera – which is nonetheless positively marked by the narrative presence of the tapes. For this reason it is essential to specify that it is the ‘impossible’ videocamera, not the footage itself, that marks the point of the gaze in *Caché*. And this is so precisely *because* the camera as such never appears. The gaze cannot be reduced to any particular look, any specific videotape. Nor can it be considered equivalent to any sum total of such views, as we might if we were to assume, for instance, that Georges were to go on receiving endless tapes after the narrative concludes. The disjunction between the gaze and the look of individual subjects explains why Lacan describes the gaze’s agency with the French neologism *voyure*: It is an abstract faculty of seeing that cannot be identified with any individual perspective or set of perspectives; a disembodied, nonsubjective, ephemeral voyeuristic power that may never be tamed, so to speak, through suture or identification.

In this sense we can qualify the gaze as *virtual*, and we can take this qualification as an occasion to develop my argument against cinema-theoretical technologicism. In *The Virtual Life of Film*, D. N. Rodowick exhaustively traces the anxious history of the repeatedly failed attempt to define the cinema, to ground its being, in relation to the aesthetic conceptualities of modernity. He explores how the cinema’s latest technological paradigm shift - the transition from analogical-photochemical to digital-cybernetic processes - has unleashed only the most recent of the cinema’s many historical crises. Among the symptoms of the latest crisis one finds both a retrograde aesthetic nostalgia for the ineffable romance of the image projected from celluloid as well as peripatetic

pronouncements declaring the cinema's imminent death, pronouncements which, it should be pointed out, would make more sense were there any hint that the vexing 'What is cinema?' question had been satisfyingly answered. Now by technologicism I mean to designate the assumption that any significant transformation in moving image technology has the consequence of radically calling into question the premises of theoretical ideas elaborated in the context of prior technologies, as if our engagement as subjects with the movies, and with visual culture more generally, were determined by an agency defined in purely technological or medium-specific terms. Technologicism represents a regression with respect to the apparatus theory of the 1970s (Comolli, Baudry, Metz), which held a more complex concept of cinema as a hybrid formation that welds technological and socio-political elements to a properly subjective function. Though never clearly theorized in apparatus discourse, I have tried to show how the subject's construction of space is perforated by the gaze of a transcendental Other which cannot be pinned down to a single point.

Admirably, Rodowick's discussion for the most part stays immune from the vulgarity of the technologist argument as I have defined it. He accomplishes this by defining cinema's virtuality not with reference to its now nigh-universally digital technological substrate, but rather in respect of its lack of an ontological ground, its irreducibility to anything material in the ordinary sense of the word. Referring to this absence that in his view animates the medium's resistance to conceptualization or aesthetic definition as a 'psychological constant', Rodowick avers that we should view 'cinematic specificity' as the 'location of a variable constant, the instantiation of a certain form of desire that is at once semiological, psychological, technological and cultural'.¹⁰ Though I endorse

Rodowick's effort to negotiate some wiggle room between the cinema's theorization and the history of its technological conditions, his argument errs in my view where it wants to *qualify*, and therefore render or positivize, the desire that he construes as endemic to cinema. The methodological consequence of Rodowick's position is a fuzzy theoretical eclecticism that allows cinema scholars of a wide variety of orientations to fill in this blank at the heart of the medium with whatever they see fit – formal analysis, spectator theory, technological considerations or cultural context, to follow the path suggested by Rodowick's own suggestions.

The desire to place cinematic virtuality under the regime of such specific forms of knowledge is not unlike Georges' desire to know the identity of the agency responsible for the videotapes. Both strategies avoid the realization that vision in general, and cinematic spectatorship in particular, are both subsumed by a logically prior visibility: we see only on the condition that we are first given-to-be-seen by an agency which itself resists being seen. In spite of the obsessional efforts of the cinema and virtual reality industries, our subjection to the gaze in ordinary life cannot be overcome by simply adding moving image technology to 'naked' perception. Viewed from this angle, Georges's desire in *Caché* is the desire of virtual technology itself, the desire of the voyeur: finally to be able to see from a place which is subtracted from the field of vision, removed from the glare of public space. *Contra* Rodowick, then, the only possible 'specificity' in the cinema has to do with its power to present us with a rendering of the conditions of our own insertion as subjects into the field of vision.¹¹ Through the conceit of its impossible camera, *Caché* at its most fundamental level makes manifest, without however being capable of revealing, the agency that causes our own visibility to forever

trump our power to see - to organize or legislate the field of vision in conformity with the dictates of our will.

Such for Lacan are the consequences of our insertion as subjects into the visual field. This insertion, the visual face of castration, has the effect of inciting a desire to gain knowledge of what sees us, to immobilize Lacan's *voyure* in space so as to reassure ourselves that we are in fact what we wish to see ourselves to be. Georges's encounter with the video footage occasions precisely this desire; in his case, it takes the form of a desire for exculpation. Georges requires evidence – a sign from his Other – which would permit him to rationalise away his guilty conscience. The videotapes present Georges with an image of himself that does violence to his self-perception, which has the effect of catalyzing his unconscious intuitions of guilt. Why, after all, would Georges be so fixated on hearing Majid acknowledge that Georges is not responsible for his broken life if Georges were not already accusing himself of this very misdeed?

Pointing out that these accusations seem entirely out of proportion with the crime, Ranjana Khanna advances that 'Georges's boyhood lie is a simple and rather typical lie of a child'.¹² In this view, Georges is merely guilty of an act of infantile selfishness instigated by Oedipal jealousy. Why should he be held responsible in his adulthood for his behaviour as a six-year-old boy? Is there not even a pathetic aspect to Majid's melodramatic suicide, a pathos that belies his protestations that he desires nothing, no admission of guilt, from his childhood tormentor?

These observations are far from irrelevant. Yet in my view they entirely miss the point of

Caché. So does the assessment of noted postcolonial critic Paul Gilroy, who goes so far as to dismiss the film on political grounds as a perpetuation of colonialist self-absorption before the colonised other's unacknowledged difference.¹³ Gilroy laments in this vein that Majid and his son are merely stock characters whom the narrative deprives of 'the psychological gravity and complexity that is taken for granted in ciphers like Georges'. The nuanced characterisation for which Gilroy advocates is necessary if the cinema is to make progress towards 'breaking the white, bourgeois monopoly on dramatising the stresses of lived experience in this modernity'.¹⁴

But surely Haneke's film is about neither the plight of the Algerian French in general nor the particular life circumstances of Majid and his son.¹⁵ This is to say that Gilroy reproaches *Caché* for failing to accomplish a task which by any criterion it never sets out to accomplish. Nor in my view is the film especially interested in *measuring* Georges's personal guilt against the enormous criminality of the colonial nation, as if the film's message could be summed up in some liberalist calculus of personal versus collective responsibility. Rather, *Caché* returns repeatedly to what must be viewed as its central concern: Georges's refusal to acknowledge not his *guilt* – indeed if Georges is guilty it can only be for a barely significant crime, and in any case we know from Freud that guilt is in its essence out of proportion with any concrete misdemeanor – but rather his *shame*. For Georges's self-blinding to the shame occasioned by the Other's fall from grace is the true source of the guilty feelings for which he demands exoneration from his accusers. And surely the most compelling and original element of *Caché* is its exploration of how Georges's refusal to tarry with the shame of France's colonial past is betrayed by the way his desire is made manifest in the specific domain of the field of vision. *Caché*'s

ingenious indexation of the gaze therefore has the added benefit of exploring through the character of Georges how intuitions of guilt work as a defense against the uncomfortable visibility that lies at the root of the affect of shame.

The logic of my argument quite evidently rests on a theoretical differentiation of shame from guilt. This is precisely what Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars fail to do in their otherwise shrewdly observed and incisive introduction to the *Screen* dossier on *Caché*.¹⁶ ‘While collective responsibility creates the possibility of the avoidance of guilt’, they write, ‘shame can reconnect us to that guilt’. Though I agree that shame, as they put it, ‘has the power to animate history and to reveal to us our part in it’,¹⁷ psychoanalysis teaches us that this can only occur by dissociating the psyche from, not reconnecting it to, the transference dynamic of guilt. To support this statement it will be necessary to distinguish between the two affects more clearly than I have thus far. Before engaging in this task, however, it will be helpful first to provide examples from the film that will illustrate my last point about the link between, on one hand, the defenses that Georges puts up against shame and, on the other, the orientation of his desire with respect to the visual field.

Critics and commentators have rightfully emphasized the significance of the representation of Georges’s professional activities to *Caché*’s thematic. The most salient instance is the scene that shows him at work with a technical assistant in an editing suite arranging footage from a taping of his programme. We see them cut out a shot of a Rimbaud critic’s discussion of how the poet’s sister destroyed a significant portion of his work. In its place Georges features the discourse of another critic who expounds on the

apparently more appealing theme of Rimbaud's homosexuality. *Caché* shows us here that Georges aspires to mastery of the image, indeed mastery of the visual field as such. His position of influence in the media industry entitles him to stage-manage his public appearance; the way he appears, that is to say, to the psychosocial Other. It is not coincidental that the excised segment makes the point that orchestrations like the one effected by Rimbaud's sister involve censorship and repression, careful acts of selection and deletion designed to enhance one's value with respect to the Other's desire by eliminating those features that threaten to repel it. Both the set of his TV program and his dining room at home are surrounded by shelves of books or their simulacra. Georges's identity as a man of ideas is a 'sublimation' designed in this fashion to manage through idealization his public appearance.

It makes eminent sense, then, that Georges reacts badly when his ambition of visual control falls short. Upon leaving the police station where he accompanies Anne to report the videotape incident, a black cyclist zooming by in the wrong direction nearly crashes into Georges as he steps carelessly onto the street. The scene's allusion to the history of French racism and colonialism is patent. What may be less obvious is the sense in which Georges's racialising response to this violation of his world's careful construction is explicitly framed as a question of vision or, more precisely, of vision's failure. 'Are you blind? (*Tu n'as pas des yeux pour voir?*)' Georges demands to know, blinding himself to the reality that the question could just as well be asked of him. Georges' inappropriate response reveals that he is traumatized at the prospect of his invisibility to the Other, at the notion that the Other can fail in its duty, as Georges sees it, to acknowledge his presence in space. Anne, in many ways the film's moral voice, seeks to defuse the tension

by playing mediator, telling both cyclist and husband that they ‘were not paying attention’. The content of Anne’s accusation is shamelessness: a lack of concern for the ordinary social conventions of public care and courtesy, for the small impositions that appear to stand between us and the unhindered pursuit of individualistic enjoyment. Here, however, we are on specifically visual terrain. There is no guarantee, Anne’s admonition implies, that the Other sees me; no guarantee, either, that my command over the visual field will not succumb to unwelcome intrusions. From this derives the necessity of the signs and symbols that frame and circumscribe my engagement with social space. These signs remain indifferent to the obstacles they put up to my power to construct the spatial environment in accordance with my innermost wishes.

At the conclusion of the 1968-1969 seminar translated as *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan reproaches the rebellious students of Vincennes, the now-defunct ‘experimental’ campus of the University of Paris, for their *impudence*.¹⁸ By this Lacan meant to say that the absence of shame that in his view characterised the students’ desire to subvert the university system was essentially a demand for enjoyment, one which placed them outside the symbolic system of social relations and consequently presented no threat whatsoever to the mandarins of French higher education and their political interests they upheld. In response to Lacan’s admonition, Jacques-Alain Miller argues that since the late 1960s when for Lacan it first began to emerge as a social phenomenon, impudence has gone on to become the dominant psychosocial ethos. What characterizes late capitalist society today is a prohibition on prohibition, an intolerance of regulation and discipline that has the effect of bringing to ruin any value system aspiring to transcend the attitude to which Miller refers with the Latin phrase ‘*primum vivere*’: life

reduced to its pure biological functionality, from which all reflection, all philosophy (*'primum vivere deinde philosophari'* is the full maxim) is jettisoned in favour of the brute fight for survival and the pursuit of immediate gratification.¹⁹

How apt, then, that *Caché* is one of numerous Haneke films that offer in this archetypal Laurent family a telling exemplar of this attitude. On his way to a business meeting in Marseilles, Georges stops off at his mother's country estate to quiz her about Majid's expulsion from the family. She expresses worry when her son, asked about how his life is going, can only respond that he, Anne, and Pierrot are all very busy. Leading separate harried lives, they rarely see each other; yet everything is fine, everyone is healthy and functioning normally. What is striking about the scene is that Georges seems utterly resigned to his family's empty, passionless, ultra-conformist existence. This is par for the course; life has nothing more to offer. The Laurent family illustrates how for Lacan the collapse of the prohibition on enjoyment has the paradoxical effect of causing enjoyment to evaporate, reducing life to frantic but drab routine.

Then what exactly, one might wonder, is the connection between the psychoanalytic approach to shame and the enigmatic hidden camera that marks the point of the gaze in *Caché*? For Lacan, shame is the affect that arises as a result of our encounter with the gaze, and the gaze is what Georges, through his doomed attempt to master the field of vision, refuses to subject himself to. Georges refuses to avail himself of general social visibility and to withstand what would necessarily ensue: the collapse of his defensive self-image as the consummate successful professional who owes nothing to anyone. Acknowledging such shame would require Georges to recognise that as a Frenchman he

is implicated in France's colonial history in a way that moves well beyond the question of his individual responsibility. Instead, Georges finds it easier to wallow in guilt and the denial of guilt, the one being inseparable from the other. 'Guilt', Miller writes, 'is the effect on the subject of an Other that judges, thus of an Other that contains the values that the subject has supposedly transgressed'. Shame, in contrast, 'is related to an Other prior to the Other that judges, one that only sees or lets be seen'.²⁰ What renders the encounter that Georges orchestrates with Majid so traumatic is therefore Majid's refusal to accuse, his insistence that it is not from his perspective, not from his point of view, that Georges appears guilty. Equally important, of course, is Majid's refusal to exonerate Georges. Majid's and his son's declarations imply that they simply do not possess the knowledge on the basis of which Georges could be judged.

In its clever way *Caché* makes this patent when Georges watches the videotape of the tense conversation during which he threatens Majid into admitting responsibility for what he melodramatically calls a campaign of terror. Georges literally sees himself from a different angle: that of the hidden camera – the gaze – present but unsituated within the walls of Majid's apartment. The camera triangulates, infinitises even, the visual dynamic; it provides an ineffable additional perspective which subverts Georges's demand to be judged innocent, or indeed guilty. If only Majid would admit to shooting the footage, if only he would explicitly confess to wanting Georges to pay for his childhood malevolence, then Georges would have an identifiable party to whom he could address his denials or admit his guilt. Georges cannot let go of Majid and his son because he has granted them through the logic of transference the power to judge, and therefore to exonerate him of his sin. The film goes to great lengths to demonstrate that this is a

power the Algerians do not hold.

Unlike guilt, shame does not offer any prospect of appeal because it is incapable of identifying a party to whom such an appeal could be addressed. To acknowledge France's national shame as well as his own would have required Georges to admit that his guilt or innocence with respect to Majid's past holds no bearing on his present capacity to intervene constructively in the Algerians' lives, creatively to alter their situation as well as his own. Instead, at *Caché*'s conclusion, we leave Georges curled up naked in bed in a pharmaceutically-induced stupor. He is hidden from the world like the camera-gaze whose ineffable existence, all the evidence would seem to show, will go on tormenting him, transforming his life, though it has perhaps already, into a living hell. And surely it has come time for film studies to take a lesson from the tragedy of Georges. Heeding this lesson would require its practitioners to recognize with Lacan the difference between geometrical and visual paradigms of space, to acknowledge that our study of visual culture must be premised on this latter paradigm, and to think through the necessary failure of moving image technology, no matter how seductively convincing its virtual worlds may seem, to forestall our shame-inducing encounter with the unsettling agency of the gaze.

Notes

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¹ See for example Benjamin Stora, *Algeria 1830-2000: A Short History*, Jane Marie Todd (trans), Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001, pp84-93; Michel Levine, *Les ratonnades d'octobre*, Paris, Ramsay, 1986; and Jean-Luc Einaudi, *La Bataille de Paris, 17 octobre 1961*, Paris, Seuil, 1991.

² Einaudi, op. cit.

³ Michael Haneke, *Caché*, Sony Pictures Classics, 2005.

⁴ Peter Wollen, 'On Suture', in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies*, London, New Left Books, 1982; Jean-Pierre Oudart, 'Cinema and Suture', *Screen*, 18, 4 (Winter 1977-8), 35-47.

⁵ Wollen, op. cit., p87.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Alan Sheridan (trans), London, Norton, 1981; Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles*, Geneva, Droz, 1963, published in English as 'The Letter on Blindness', in *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works*, Lorna Sandler (trans), Manchester, Clinamen, 1999, 147-190.

⁷ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London, Penguin Books, 2004.

⁸ Lacan, op. cit., p86.

⁹ Sheridan translates Lacan's 'Jamais tu ne me regardes là où je te vois' as 'You never look at me from the place from which I see you' (118). Clearly this is a mistranslation, since it merely states the banal fact that the Other never sees me from the place I presently occupy, as if the Other and I could possibly be present in the same space at the same time. See *Le Séminaire, livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed), Paris, Seuil, 1973, p103.

¹⁰ D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2007, p22.

¹¹ For an example of how this argument can be developed, see my analysis of the thematic of framing in Chantal Akerman's filmic Proust adaptation *La Captive* (2000) in 'The Failure of Spectatorship', *Communication Theory*, 17, 1 (February 2007), 43-60.

¹² Ranjana Khanna, 'From Rue Morgue to Rue des Iris', *Screen*, 48, 2 (Summer 2007), 237-44, p243.

¹³ Paul Gilroy, 'Shooting crabs in a barrel', *Screen*, 48, 2 (Summer 2007), 233-35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p234.

¹⁵ Gilroy's argument becomes even less persuasive, it seems to me, when we expand our frame of reference to other Haneke films. The storyline related to the Malian teacher and his mother in *Code Inconnu* (2000) is a good example here.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars, 'Hidden in plain sight: bringing terror home', *Screen*, 48, 2 (Summer 2007), 215-21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p221.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Russell Grigg (trans), London, Norton, 2007.

¹⁹ Jacques-Alain Miller, 'On Shame', in Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (eds), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2006, p24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p13.