



Modern MASK

A Journal of the Arts

[home](#)[art & photography](#)[film & tv](#)[literature](#)[music](#)[theatre](#)

Review

Remembrance of Things Hidden:
Caché, Directed by Michael Haneke, 2005
Omnia El Shakry

Scholars of colonialism have long sought to expose that which remains hidden or invisible within the colonial encounter. Like Freud and Marx before them who unraveled the complex semiotics of the symptom or the commodity form, postcolonial theorists have endeavored to unmask European ideologies of progress, civility, and liberalism. *Caché* is a film that makes visible all that is invisible beneath the pretentious veneer of Parisian bourgeois domesticity. Underneath all surfaces of bourgeois respectability, Michael Haneke's corpus teaches us, is a crime.

Caché's claustrophobic camerawork, its staccato dialogue, the intensity of the performances elicited from its actors, and a temporalization that slowly culminates in a crescendo, all serve to simultaneously alienate and seduce the viewer. This is a film that is only obliquely about colonialism—about France's hidden relationship to Algeria and Algerians. It is not a film explicitly about the Algerian war of independence—its strengths lay precisely in the fact that it refracts the colonial experience through the eyes of two metropolitan men—one French and privileged (Georges, played by Daniel Auteuil) and the other an orphaned Algerian (Majid, played by Maurice Bénichou). Neither symbols nor metaphors, Georges and Majid evoke, rather than represent, the colonial encounter.

If, as Haneke contends, "the truth is always hidden" (la vérité est toujours cachée) then his film demonstrates the tenuous nature of the real, buried under the guilty conscience, the "bad faith" of Georges's traumatic dream world, infused with the return of the repressed. The surreal dream sequences that punctuate the film—and the ambiguous nature of their truth or falsehood—serve as counterpoints to the banal quotidian worlds that Georges Laurent, a successful literary television host and his wife Anne (Juliette Binoche), a publisher, inhabit.

Georges and Anne are terrorized by surveillance video-tapes and unnerving child-like drawings that they receive anonymously at their doorstep—but this is not the depoliticized, deracinated, parochial vision of a David Lynch. *Caché* can only simplistically be called a psychological thriller—despite the fact that it hinges upon the build up of tension. Rather, it aspires to universal subject matter (guilt, the status of truth, visibility and invisibility) while being "stained" (to borrow Judith Butler's turn of phrase) by the particularity of the colonial example. That "stain" is October 17, 1961 in which Maurice Papon, then Prefect of the Paris police and a former Vichy collaborator, brutally repressed a peaceful demonstration of Algerian protestors—leading, according to numerous accounts, to 200 deaths. The Papon incident is coded cinematically by the disappearance of Majid's parents—who were in the employ of Georges' parents as farmhands on their country estate. Thus, despite Haneke's own claims that his film not be "reduced" to the Algerian question, it is irreducibly stained by its example of personal guilt.

The question of non-Western immigration in Europe is similarly enigmatically coded in the film through a street incident in which latent unconscious racial tensions manifest themselves in a way that any liberal minded bourgeois would have difficulty denying. Similarly, in a scene where Georges and Anne realize that their son Pierrot is missing—the television in the background is replete with news images of war in the Middle East. In an important sense, then, mainstream American comparisons of Haneke's work to Hitchcock or Lynch, miss the crucial point that his most recent films (notably *Caché* and *Code Inconnu*) are infected by the historicity of the "new Europe" and its hidden relationship to colonial oppression.

By Haneke's own account, *Caché* is a morality tale about guilt. Yet, the elliptical representation of colonialism vitiates against a film that is simply didactic. Rather all forms of difference—particularly class difference and racial difference—are skillfully evoked by distance (the distance between Georges and Majid, between Georges' apartment and Majid's apartment, between Majid's son and Georges, between Majid's son and Georges' son). The representation of that distance is performed in and through language and through the emotive intensity that Haneke elicits from his actors—Maurice Bénichou's haunting and emotionally overwhelming sadness and Daniel Auteuil's bourgeois bravado and refusal to admit guilt or error. Both Bénichou and Auteuil were born in Algeria further lending an aura of personal identification to the film, both real and imagined.

The incomplete plot lines of the film (raised by the ever so cloying question- who made the tapes?) function, in part, as a subversion of the thriller genre. Irresolution, the promise of meaning with the delivery of none, the complicity of the viewer in definitively ascertaining or refusing to ascertain "guilt"—create a cinematic complexity that cannot be neatly categorized by genre.

Although I have emphasized the hidden political-historical dimensions of the film, it must be

noted that it can be equally viewed as part of Haneke's wider cinematic anthropology of emotions—fear (*Funny Games*, *Time of the Wolf*), guilt (*Caché*), sadness and despair (*Seventh Continent*), and numbness (*Benny's Video*). In this important sense *Caché* is also about coldness and repression, or what Haneke refers to as the "false ideal of the family." That false ideal is evident in Georges's dissimulating interaction with his wife, and the couple's awkward relationship to their son Pierrot. It is evident, as well, in Georges's icy interaction with his sick mother (played by the formidable Annie Girardot)—in which they speak but much remains unspoken and repressed. But above all it is evident in Georges's interaction with Majid, as Majid poignantly asks him why he talks as if they were strangers.

The by now infamous wide-angle shot at the end of the film (whose contents Haneke claims one can "see or not see") stands in as it were for a film that refuses to deliver a singular meaning to its audience, but rather presents them with the ethical dilemma of choosing, or refusing, to impute guilt.

Omnia El Shakry © 2006

[home](#)

[art & photography](#)

[film & tv](#)

[literature](#)

[music](#)

[theatre](#)

[\[about us\]](#)

[\[contact us\]](#)

[\[editors & contributors\]](#)

[\[submission guidelines\]](#)

[\[archives\]](#)

[\[event listings\]](#)

[\[links\]](#)