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This article examines Michael Haneke’s 2005 film Caché and its treatment of the October 1961 massacre in light of recent scholarship about memory and trauma. It argues that the film demands of its viewers a complex, critical position, requiring us not merely to passively re-witness the traumatising events of 17 October, but to take on as spectators a more active role in the work of remembering. The article examines narrative and visual elements in the film in order to demonstrate how Caché illustrates and questions how film and other media forms contribute to the working through of collective trauma and, in so doing, function as potential ‘sites of memory’.

What is denied or repressed in a lapse of memory does not disappear; it returns in a transformed, at times disfigured and disguised manner. (LaCapra 1998, p. 10)

Moi, j’ai appris ça pas avant deux ans, par hasard, dans un documentaire dans ARTE sur cet événement en ’61 et j’étais super choqué parce que je me disais, “Comment on peut avoir dans l’année 1961 200 morts qui sont dans la Seine et personne ne parle de ça pendant des années et des années?” Ça m’a tellement irrité que je me disais mais on doit en parler dans ce contexte. (Haneke 2006)
The film *Caché* (2005), directed by the Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke, is a film about what happens when the hidden becomes exposed, about what occurs when the memory of an unpleasant past disrupts and disfigures a peaceful amnesiac present. It deals more specifically with what Jean-Luc Einaudi (1991) has termed the 'Battle of Paris', the police massacre on 17 October 1961 of hundreds of Algerians participating in a peaceful demonstration against the French occupation of Algeria, an event that for many years was wiped from French collective memory as the above quote from Haneke suggests. While many scholars have discussed the treatment of repressed memory in the film, I offer in this article a different approach to *Caché* and its treatment of the October 1961 massacre by analyzing it in light of recent scholarship about memory and trauma. I argue that the film demands of its viewers a complex, critical position, requiring us not merely to passively re-witness the traumatising events of 17 October, but to take on as spectators a more active role in the work of remembering, and I examine to what extent *Caché* illustrates and interrogates how film and other media forms contribute to the working through of collective trauma and, in so doing, function as potential 'sites of memory'.

In his seminal work *Lieux de mémoire*, historian Pierre Nora has said: 'Habiterions-nous encore notre mémoire, nous n’aurions pas besoin d’y consacrer des lieux' (1992, p. 24). In many ways, the French-Algerian war may be considered a site of non-memory (lieu de non-mémoire) for the French. At least until fairly recently, France has been seen as unwilling to acknowledge head-on the role it played in the Algerian War of Independence. For example, in *La Gangrène et l’oubli* (1998) and elsewhere, Benjamin Stora discusses in detail the absence of films representing the French-Algerian war ‘directement, sans fard [...] pendant qu’elle se déroule’ (1991, p. 41). Stora argues that even those films that have attempted to deal with the war have been very one-dimensional and ‘cloistered’, and have tended to exclude a range of viewpoints, instead focusing primarily (and often nostalgically) on a French military perspective. He suggests that the ‘Algerian wound’ remained unhealed in France in part because French cinema was for so long unable or unwilling to restore this plurality. These cloistered and nostalgic cinematic representations of the Algerian war, Stora argues, are symptomatic of collective amnesia in France.

However, the work of recent trauma theorists offers a different kind of insight into the role that French films, as potential memory sites, have had in perpetuating the collective amnesia surrounding the Algerian war. In *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Dominick LaCapra (1998) emphasises the importance of critical witnessing in the creation of potential sites of memory. According to LaCapra, ‘a memory site is generally also a site of trauma, and the extent to which it remains invested with trauma marks the extent to which memory has not been effective in coming to terms with it, notably through modes of mourning’ (p. 10). Borrowing from Freud, LaCapra distinguishes between the compulsive ‘acting out’ of a traumatic event (melancholia), in which it is obsessively re-enacted, and the ‘working through’ of trauma, a process of mourning that involves ‘not definitive closure or full self-possession but a recurrent yet variable attempt to relate accurate, critical memory-work to the requirements of
desirable action in the present’ (p. 42). When trauma is merely acted out, there is no real critical confrontation with the past; it is compulsively relived without allowing for mourning and for a healthy reinvestment in life (p. 45). The tendency to compulsively act out traumatic events of the past can take place, says LaCapra, either on an experiential level (through flashbacks, dreams, etc.) or on a collective, artistic level. Memory sites like museums, memorials, rituals, or (for the purposes of my discussion) cinematic or literary works of art, become sites of memory only to the extent that they permit mourning to take place. But, the question is, as he puts it, ‘to what extent are such modern sites [. . .] viable in making mourning possible?’ (p. 44).

_Caché_ is a film that appears to ask itself this question, for though it does not represent the October 1961 massacre directly—Haneke himself asserts that he did not want to ‘insist too much on that point’—it does deal with how the memory of a traumatic event, once repressed, comes back disfigured to haunt both perpetrator and victim. Released in 2005, only three weeks before the series of demonstrations and car burnings in the suburbs of Paris, _Caché_ illustrates the devastating consequences of the inability to appropriately mourn a traumatic event. Its plot can be summed up as follows: Georges Laurent, the host of a literary television talk show, lives in a chic Parisian apartment with his wife Anne and their son Pierrot. At the start of the film, which is set in 2004, Georges begins receiving a series of anonymous videotapes of himself and his family, filmed clandestinely from the street across from his apartment building. As the film’s narrative unfolds, we learn details about Georges’ past. When Georges was only six years old, his parents decided to adopt a young boy, Majid, the son of two Algerian workers who had been employed on Georges’ family’s estate but who were killed during the police massacre of 17 October 1961 while participating in the peaceful demonstration against the French occupation of Algeria. Georges, jealous of the young Majid, attempts to derail the adoption by ‘telling lies’ about him, claiming to his parents that Majid had decapitated their rooster in order to scare him. As a result of these lies, Majid is sent away to an orphanage and deprived of the comfortable life and good education that his adoptive parents could have provided him. More than 40 years pass before the two see each other again, when Georges begins to suspect that it is Majid who is sending him the anonymous videotapes. After a series of confrontations between the two men, Majid invites Georges to visit him in his apartment complex on the poorer outskirts of Paris where he lives with his son, who remains unnamed throughout the film. In an extremely explicit and shocking scene, Majid slits his own throat in Georges’ presence. The film ends with a very long and ambiguous shot in which it is possible to detect the two sons of Georges and Majid speaking to each other on the steps of Pierrot’s school.

The question that interests me is whether the film _Caché_, which quite deliberately revives the traumatic memory of October 1961, and which enacts in a shocking and disturbing way the failure to deal with the trauma, succeeds in the process in ‘making mourning possible’, to use LaCapra’s terms, for its viewers. Or rather, is it merely to be seen as a compulsive acting-out of a traumatic event, as an exercise in what Alice Kaplan, another trauma theorist, has called ‘empty empathy’? Indeed,
Michael Haneke has often been criticised for producing gratuitously violent and even sadistic films. Although most scholars have praised Caché and seen it as less violent and more socially valuable than other films of his like Funny Games or Benny's Video, some critics disagree. Most notably perhaps, Paul Gilroy wrote in the journal Screen:

We leave the theatre jolted but with no clear sense of how to act more justly or ethically. Instead, Haneke invites his audience to become resigned to its shame, discomfort and melancholia. (2007, p. 234)

One cannot deny that within the narrative of the film Caché, nothing is resolved by the exchange of videotapes between Georges and Majid and there is no ‘working through’ of past trauma on a personal, let alone national, level. On the contrary, the stirring up of past memories leads not to reconciliation or healing but to fresh trauma in the form of Majid’s suicide. Even the witnessing of Majid’s suicide appears to offer little overt edification for either Georges or the viewer. Rather, by bringing together within the same narrative framework the characters of Georges (who would prefer at all costs to forget or deny his past) and Majid (whose suicide suggests perhaps a state of melancholia in LaCapra’s sense of the term, i.e. a compulsive acting out of his own trauma), Haneke himself would appear to reopen on a narrative level the psychological wound left by the Algerian war, offering the viewer little hope for healing or reconciliation in the future, as suggested by the albeit ambiguous shot at the end of the film of Majid’s and Georges’ sons, who, we realise, may have been involved in their fathers’ drama.

If, as Gilroy asserts, viewers of Caché are left ‘jolted’, without any clear ethical direction, it is arguably because Caché has a very different goal in mind than reassuring or instructing its viewers. For one thing, Michael Haneke does not see cinema as having a curative or therapeutic role, quite the contrary. In an interview from 2003, Haneke suggested a different purpose to his films:

In my definition anything that could be termed obscene departs from the bourgeois norm. Whether concerned with sexuality or violence or another taboo issue, anything that breaks with the norm is obscene. Insofar as truth is always obscene, I hope that all of my films have at least an element of obscenity. By contrast, pornography is the opposite, in that it makes into a commodity that which is obscene, makes the unusual consumable, which is the truly scandalous aspect ofporno [...] . I think that any contemporary art practice is pornographic if it attempts to bandage the wound, so to speak, which is to say our social and psychological wound. Pornography it seems to me is no different from war films or propaganda films in that it tries to make the visceral, horrific, or transgressive elements of life consumable. Propaganda is far more pornographic than a home video of two people fucking. (Haneke 2003, p. 31)

Thus, Haneke does not attempt in Caché to ‘bandage the wound’ by representing the ‘truth’ of the 1961 massacre since, in any event, and in his words, ‘we can never, ever know [...] what the truth is. There are a thousand truths’ (2006). He is less interested in representing a consumable version of the historical ‘truth’ of 17 October
1961 than in creating for his viewers a film that requires active interpretive work. According to Catherine Wheatley:

Reflexivity within [Haneke’s] films is used not […] to create a form of cinema which is a vehicle for a political and moral agenda, but to encourage a more open-ended reflection on the spectator’s part about moral questions. On an implicit level, the films prompt their spectators to ask: How are we complicit with the apparatus? What are the moral consequences of this? Why, upon watching Haneke’s film, do we so often feel irritated, cross, even guilty? (2009, p. 5)

A close reading of the narrative and visual elements of Cacheé illuminates Haneke’s approach to engaged, ethical spectatorship. On a narrative level, Haneke counterposes two opposed and incompatible versions of the past. Since Haneke never represents past events directly, but only indirectly as mediated through the highly subjective memory or imagination of Georges, the viewer is denied a comfortable access to the past and is forced into a sort of narrative limbo between truth and lies, past and present. We thus become less concerned with the actual narrative (‘what happened’) than with narrative construction (how the story is told), which is a higher level of interpretive activity. Secondly, on a visual level as well, Haneke constructs his film in a way that refuses viewers a passive consumption of images. Rather, Cacheé trains viewers to mistrust the transparency of those images and to doubt the ability of media to communicate ‘truth’. Visually too, what we see (or do not see) becomes less important than how we see.

The narrative of Cacheé is built around the various rifts that exist between its characters. Images, both literal and figurative, of wounds, gashes, scars, and breaches abound in Cacheé. Because of the bifurcated past of Georges and Majid, a deep breach exists between them that is at the same time geographical, economic, social, and emotional. This division is left gaping open at the end of Cacheé, and becomes even more profound when Majid slits his throat, adding a physical and therefore undeniable wound to the other more psychological scars that Georges refuses to acknowledge. Geographically, the unhealed wound of the Algerians killed in the centre of Paris on 17 October 1961 is evoked, albeit in reverse, when Georges, who lives in a comfortable bourgeois apartment in the centre of Paris, must enter the poorer outskirts of Paris to confront Majid about the videotapes. Similarly, the territorial struggle over the occupation of Algeria so violently disputed in 1961 is never overtly at issue in Cacheé—again, it is referred to only once just briefly—but it is played out on a familial level as Georges is forced to confront a conflicting version of his and Majid’s shared family history. Thus, the historical trauma (from the Greek word for ‘wound’) caused by the 1961 massacre is allegorised in Cacheé by the personal wound that exists between Georges and Majid; like the national, collective wound left by the French-Algerian war, the personal trauma in Cacheé has lain dormant and un-mourned by those most affected by it.

Indeed, the very act of remembering is figured in Cacheé as a sort of wound, a violent rupturing of a peaceful amnesiac present by an unwelcome past. The world represented in the film is infused with a strong will to forget the past. The film’s
physical setting is pointedly a-historical and hermetic; though shot in Paris, we rarely see any identifiable monuments or landmarks or any references to France’s past. All of the main characters in the film, it can be said, have been living in a state of amnesia. Before the arrival of the videotapes, and indeed even after their arrival, it is clear that Georges has chosen to forget the childhood incident with Majid; for the first half of the film he refuses to acknowledge Majid’s existence to anyone but his mother, who is in even deeper denial than Georges.\(^\text{16}\) Even Majid, the character assumed to be stirring up the past, has himself let years go by without contacting Georges.\(^\text{17}\)

The denial of the past on the part of Cache’s characters can be seen as mirroring that of the postcolonial French. Guy Austin has argued that Georges:

\begin{quote}
embodies the denial that has operated within French society in regard to Algeria. He is an allegorical figure whose personal demons represent the cultural phenomenon of la fracture coloniale [... ] Georges incarnates postcolonial France: guilty, in denial, fearful, yet also powerful and violently assertive. (2007, p. 531).
\end{quote}

For example, when, after viewing the last videotape with his wife Anne, Georges is finally forced to explain to her how he derailed Majid’s adoption, he refers to the incident as an ‘intermède’. Anne objects to his use of this word for what was essentially, she says, a tragedy, and Georges snaps back: ‘Peut-être que c’était une tragédie. J’en sais rien et je m’en sens pas responsable. C’est normal, non? Tout ça est absurde.’ Georges’ refusal to use the word \textit{tragedy} in reference to what happened to Majid echoes the insistence on the part of the French government to refer to the war in Algeria merely as ‘les événements’.\(^\text{18}\) In both instances, the refusal to give words to reality, to name the trauma, reflects a strong will to repress the memory of it. Thus, what occurs in Cache is not a healthy working through of past trauma. As Dominick LaCapra says, ‘Mourning [...] requires the specification or naming of victims. Without such specification, chances are that mourning will be arrested and one will be locked in melancholy, compulsive repetition and acting out the past’ (1998, p. 69).

Indeed, Cache’s narrative illustrates quite graphically the violent consequences of arrested mourning. The wounds of the past are reopened, only to remain gaping at the end of the film. None of the strategies used to force Georges to face the past ultimately manage to do so; not the anonymous videotapes and drawings he receives, not the various confrontations he has with Majid and his son, not even his firsthand witnessing of Majid’s violent suicide. Although these events do manage to stir up a sense of grudging guilt in Georges, none of them is able to jar him completely from his state of complacent amnesia.\(^\text{19}\) The direct and unmediated act of witnessing Majid’s suicide does force Georges to finally confront his memory of a past long buried; in the penultimate scene of the film, the image of Majid as a child being forcibly removed from the Laurent family estate presumably comes to Georges in a dream.\(^\text{20}\) However, if Georges’ memory is slowly aroused throughout the film, Cache strongly suggests the impossibility of anything resembling healing or critical working through of the trauma Georges is forced to confront. In the final sequences of the film, Georges himself appears to be completely traumatised. He leaves work early, avoids daylight, takes
sleeping pills, and when the film ends, falls into sleep and begins dreaming. Instead of signalling a return to memory and appropriate mourning, Georges’ deliberate retreat in the unconscious is suggestive, rather, of melancholia; in LaCapra’s terms:

the tendency compulsively to repeat, relive, be possessed by, or act out traumatic scenes of the past, whether in more or less controlled artistic procedures or in uncontrolled existential experiences of hallucination, flashback, dream, and re-traumatising breakdown triggered by incidents that more or less obliquely recall the past. (1998, p. 10)

Majid too appears to be trapped by his own desire to relive or act out the past, although his actions, thoughts, and motivations remain very ambiguous throughout the film. According to Pierre Nora:

the less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals [. . . ] the psychologization of memory has thus given every individual the sense that his or her salvation ultimately depends on the repayment of an impossible debt. (1989, p. 16)²¹

As the son of Algerians whose collective history has been occulted, it would appear that Majid is attempting to force Georges to repay the impossible debt created when he was sent from the Laurents’ house. Certainly, by eviscerating himself in Georges’ presence, without the intermediary of a camera lens, Majid rips open a wound that Georges will be unable to ignore, deny, or forget. At the same time, he also takes revenge against Georges, potentially traumatising him, and eliminating once and for all the possibility of any reconciliation or healing between the two men.

In Caché, memory occupies a liminal space between the past and the present, between the experience of living through a traumatic event (le vécu) and the ongoing experience of living with the memory of that event (that which is survived or survécu). Throughout the film, Haneke establishes this liminality not just narratively through the rift between his characters, but also formally by correlating the act of remembering and the act of film viewership, and by constructing his film in a way that encourages active viewership and what trauma theorists like LaCapra might call ‘critical memory work’. 

Visually, one of the ways Haneke’s film does this is by mimicking the tricks of memory by repeatedly conflating, concealing, and then revealing its own diegetic and extra-diegetic layers such that as viewers we are often uncertain as to whether we are witnessing firsthand the actions and events of the narrative or rather, a mediated representation of those events in the form of the anonymous videotapes. This confusion is established in the very first scene of the film, which consists of a long stationary shot of the front of Georges’ apartment. We are unaware that what we are watching is a video recording until we see the tracking marks and hear Georges’ voiceover as he rewinds the tape. These repeated moments of confusion between the present-tense ‘real time’ of the narrative action and the mediated re-presentation of that action onto videotape, between diegetic and extra-diegetic space, give us throughout the film a sense of déjá vu, of returning to the scene of a crime. More
importantly, they also create for the viewer a destabilising and haunting effect that approximates perhaps the act of remembering a past event. Thus, the viewer is in a constant state of suspension between the ‘reality’ of lived events and the various suspect, ambiguous, or distorted versions of those events as transmitted by the characters. It is almost always impossible in Caché to know whether it is Georges or Majid who is lying, or to distinguish in general between truth and lies, between real memories and dreams, between what appears to be transparently evident and what appears to be hidden.22

Another way Haneke promotes active viewership in Caché is by distinguishing between those forms of media that promote transformative memory work, and those that do not. He creates for the ‘big screen’ of cinema if not a site of memory, at least a formal space in which the ‘memory of Algeria’, as Stora calls it, is disinterred. In Caché, however, it is the ‘small screen’ of the television that functions repeatedly as the would-be site of memory, the virtual meeting place between two conflicting perspectives of the past. Majid first encounters Georges as an adult when he sees him on TV, and it is through the television screen that Georges is forced to remember Majid when he begins receiving the mysterious videotapes. Televised news reports about various world conflicts—between Iraq and the American coalition, between Israelis and Palestinians, between the Sikhs and the Hindus in India—drone constantly out of Georges and Anne’s TV screen throughout the film. This endless loop of televised tragedy and unresolved conflict seems to suggest that the various world traumas, though amply, even obsessively documented, are not likely to be remembered for long, one traumatic image merely replacing another. Indeed, in one scene, Georges remains numbly glued to the TV news, unable to react to the news of his own son’s disappearance. Haneke, who has been critical of television as a medium,23 suggests that the televising of events is no guarantor of memory, understanding, or appropriate emotional response to trauma. On the contrary, he sees television, as Karen Ritzenhoff has put it, as part of a ‘paradigm shift in contemporary society: the move from analogue to digital technology that enables even more access to the global community but impoverishes interpersonal communication’ (Ritzenhoff 2008, p. 137).

Thus, for Georges and Majid, television represents a failed memory site, for it is the virtual battleground between their two irreconcilable versions of the past. Before the arrival of the videotapes, which quickly invade and occupy the site of Georges and Anne’s television screen, it is Georges who clearly enjoys an advantage in his command of the televised image. Host and producer of a TV ‘roundtable’ discussion about literature, Georges participates directly in the construction and conservation of France’s dominant cultural identity. Aired every two weeks, his show hosts attractive-looking intellectuals in a very civil and cultivated discussion of various French literary works. Georges occupies therefore the site of the mainstream of French media culture, and he produces, in Haneke’s very specific sense of the term, a form of televised pornography; his show is highly lucrative and its viewership is growing quickly precisely because Georges has succeeded in making his literary subject matter,
normally considered to be overly intellectual or obscure, accessible or ‘consumable’ to
a wide audience.

Indeed, Georges has based the integrity of his entire life—the success of his career,
his standard of living, his family life—on a belief in the transparency of images, which,
in general, defines propaganda. He has succeeded in convincing his audience and
in convincing himself that the television screen represents a reliable transmitter of
one-dimensional, accessible truth. Thus, the set of his television show looks like a
living room, looks in fact like his own living room, which is lined with books and glass
furniture. As host of the show, he is supposed not to be performing a role, rather, he
simply ‘plays himself’, an avid reader and connoisseur of French literature. Georges’
show, however, is not as transparent as it appears to be. For example, from what we can
tell, Georges is not what he appears to be on TV; we rarely if ever see him read at home,
as he is constantly glued to the TV set. And although his show appears to be very
spontaneous and natural, shot live, the images that Georges creates as producer of the
show are recorded in advance and are highly edited and manipulated. In fact, the show
is popular precisely because Georges’ viewers—or, as they are referred to in the film,
his ‘fans’—feel like they know him personally, that they are guests in his home.
In short, the whole basis for Georges’ life, career, and happiness is built on the
transparency of the image of himself that he has created for his public and this image
has made no place for the unpleasant past he shared with Majid.

If Georges is troubled by the anonymous videotapes and drawings, it is precisely
because they threaten this transparency; sent also to his wife and son and to his
employer, the videos and drawings have the potential to expose the line between his
private life and his public image and to disturb his comfortable bourgeois existence.
But most of all, the sent images are troubling as much for what they hide as for what
they reveal. The images produced by Georges in his TV studio benefit from a studied
artifice, from a sophisticated ability to naturalise and make accessible their subject
matter. In sharp contrast, those produced by Majid or his son are upsetting perhaps
because they do precisely the opposite: they obscure or hide their own subject matter
and resist a single facile interpretation. The contents of the videos and drawings are
not in themselves particularly offensive or disturbing; Libby Saxton (2007) has argued
that they are, in fact, devoid of content and exist primarily to make George aware of
the fact that he is being watched. The videos lack the technical and visual
sophistication of Georges’ TV show and are obviously the work of an amateur. Filmed
by a hidden and unmanned camera, and entirely unedited, the videotapes reveal no
evidence of manipulation. They are also anonymous since neither Majid nor his son
ever officially acknowledges having made them, despite the fact that one of the tapes
was filmed from inside their own apartment. Indeed, the first video received by
Georges was filmed from the ‘Rue des iris’ (or ‘Iris Street’), a name that evokes the
naked eye or, metaphorically perhaps, the disembodied lens of the hidden video
camera.

The extreme narrative and visual inaccessibility of the anonymous videotapes
threaten Georges and give him the feeling of being ‘terrorised’, a word he uses
repeatedly to describe the videotapes’ effect on him. Rather than having the desired effect of making Georges recognise his role as perpetrator of a past wrong, they lead Georges to perpetrate new wrongs against Majid, by threatening and harassing him and his son. Ironically though, the tapes make Georges feel like a victim. However low-tech and unsophisticated they might appear to be, the images recorded on the videotapes invade and threaten the site on which Georges has built his life and identity, the TV set. For while Georges’ public image is less transparent than it appears to be on TV and hides more than it appears to hide, so do the videotapes reveal more than they initially appear to, as Georges himself begins to decipher them over the course of the film.

LaCapra points out that past traumas cannot be properly ‘worked through’ if the various subject-positions (victim, perpetrator, bystander, etc.) are not distinguished and acknowledged. He says, ‘the process of coming critically to terms with the past requires perspective on subject-positions and the ability to resist the total consumption of the self by a given identity that threatens to prevent any form of renewal’ (1996, p. 12). Perhaps because Georges is unable or unwilling to see himself in any other role than that of the victim, the videotapes never completely succeed in transforming his TV screen into a site of memory. It is not even clear whether the direct and unmediated act of witnessing Majid’s suicide is able to force Georges to confront his memory of a past long buried. It is true that the penultimate sequence of the film cuts to Majid as a child being forcibly removed from the Laurent family estate, suggesting, though not definitively, that Georges has at least begun to dream about his past. However, the effect of Majid’s suicide on Georges remains at best highly ambiguous. As the film ends, we see him hiding out at a movie theatre, taking sleeping pills or *cachets* (a play on words with the film’s title) and withdrawing into the unconscious, all of which might easily suggest a desire to once again escape and forget the past.

Haneke has himself suggested that Majid’s act of suicide represents in part at least an act of aggression against Georges. When he slits his throat and eviscerates himself without the intermediary of a camera lens, Majid creates a new, physical wound that Georges will be unable to ignore, deny, or forget. He also takes revenge against Georges and opens up in him a psychological wound, which, though it leads Georges to come up against his past, also eliminates once and for all the possibility of any reconciliation or healing between the two men.

One might argue that in representing Majid’s suicide in such a shocking and explicit way, Haneke exploits a moment of violence to force his viewers to face their own buried past, the memory of 17 October 1961. Haneke appears fully conscious of the risks one takes when one tries to represent on screen the events of a violent trauma. By representing the visceral and the horrific, the filmmaker runs the risk either of commodifying it and anesthetising his audience (as the numerous TV reports seem to have done to Georges), or of terrorising or traumatising his audience (as Majid’s tapes and suicide seem to do). Yet, in the end, it can be argued that the film *Caché* attempts neither to terrorise nor to anesthetise its viewers. On one hand,
and thanks to the scene’s technical realism, the viewer participates completely in the horror of the moment when Majid slits his throat, for the staging of the throat-slitting is utterly and seamlessly realistic. On the other hand, and unlike for Georges, the violent act is mediated for the viewers who, by this point in the film, cannot help but be conscious of witnessing the scene from the exact same position in which Majid’s previous video was shot. We become all the more conscious of this fact when just before Majid slits his throat, Georges moves off screen and the viewer’s point of view, which up until this point has been aligned with Georges’ point of view, breaks with it. In this brief moment, the diegetic viewer (Georges) and we the non-diegetic viewers become distinct and othered. We are prevented from seeing the reaction of Georges, who disappears from the pro-filmic space and our own reaction to the horror of the scene is thus unmediated by the viewpoint or reaction of Georges. We thereby become, at least potentially, more conscious of our status as non-diegetic viewers.

Catherine Wheatley (2009) argues that the morality of Haneke’s work lies in its ability to teach ‘discernment’. As she puts it, this means ‘making a conscious effort to be aware at all times of [the spectator’s] own position as both a consumer of film and an active producer of meaning’ (p. 184). Just as the presence of video tracking marks and voiceovers at various times throughout the film make us conscious of the fact that what we are seeing is just a recording, this unusual pro-filmic moment too interrupts the illusion of seamless transparency that appears to exist between the viewer’s point of view and that of Georges. Indeed, Haneke seems to have wanted to prepare us for this scene, to train our eyes to the levels of mediation in the film so that by the time we get to this shocking moment, we are already distinguishing between raw events and the mediated representation of those events, a distinction which is, as Dominick LaCapra suggests, necessary for a true ‘working through’ of the traumatic event and of transformative memory work.

Just before slitting his throat, Majid says to Georges, ‘Je voulais que tu sois présent.’ His words recall Benjamin Stora’s desire to make the French-Algerian war more present in French memory. Haneke too wants his viewers to be more present, he wants us to believe in the mediated image he presents and he wants us to be affected by the horror of the visceral act he represents ‘directement et sans fard’, in Stora’s words. Yet he also wants us to be conscious of the fact that his representation, no matter how real it might seem, is in the end a manipulation of reality. By positioning the viewer between the viscerality of the moment and the consciousness of the experience, that which might have become an act of aggression against the spectator, a site of cinematic trauma (or ‘pornography’, in Haneke’s sense of the term), is arguably transformed into a site of memory. For not only do we witness this act of evisceration along with the character of Georges in all its horror, but, at the same time, and unlike Georges, we are potentially able to bear witness to it, attest to its truth, which is necessary to the memory of a traumatic event.

Michael Haneke has said that film ‘is an artificial construct. It pretends to reconstruct reality. But it doesn’t do that—it’s a manipulative form. It’s a lie that can
reveal the truth. But if a film isn’t a work of art, it’s just complicit with the process of manipulation’ (2005a, p. 51). In *Caché*, Haneke does not claim to ‘bandage the wound’ of the Algerian war. Nor does he wish, by bringing together on film two dissociated and alienated would-be brothers, to cinematically reconstruct the murder of the 200 or more Algerians thrown in the Seine in 1961. The film is neither, I would argue, a facile reconciliation of two enemies nor an aggressive act of provocation meant to stir up old enmities. It does however, directly confront its audience, those viewers who perhaps did not witness and are not personally implicated in the events of 17 October 1961, but who have inherited the legacy left by France’s colonial past in Algeria and who are overwhelmed daily with an excess of mediated images. By fostering critical and active viewership, *Caché* helps its audience to recognise and bear witness to a cultural trauma whose witnesses were silenced for years, and that many people would no doubt still prefer to forget.

Notes

[1] For work on the relationship between repressed memory and *Caché*, see, for example, Austin (2007), Crowley (2010), Ritzenhoff (2008), and Silverman (2010). At the writing of this essay, I had not yet read Crowley’s article, ‘When Forgetting is Remembering: Haneke’s *Caché* and the Events of October 17, 1961’, which deals most closely with this topic, but which does not treat the film in the context of trauma studies.

[2] The term *lieux de mémoire* is Pierre Nora’s. He defines them as ‘les lieux où se cristallise et se réfugie la mémoire’. The need for sites of memory arises, says Nora, whenever collective memory fails: ‘Il y a des lieux de mémoire parce qu’il n’y a plus de milieux de mémoire’ (1992, p. 25).

[3] ‘Dans ces films de soldats, souvent apparaissent la mise en scène du remords et une victimisation de ceux qui ont connu, vécu ou subi cette guerre (c’est à dire surtout des soldats français)’ (Stora 1997, p. 192).


[5] In his review of the recent film *Ennemi intime* (2007), Stora (2007) hints at the complexity of this kind of work. Although he appreciates the film’s willingness to broach the topic of the Algerian war so directly and its inclusion of multiple viewpoints toward the war, he criticises its inattention to historical chronology: ‘toutes ces abominations mises bout à bout donnent une idée absolument terrifiante de la guerre d’Algérie. Avec le risque de l’anachronisme, la plupart des faits évoqués ne s’étant pas produit en même temps. Il est vrai que cette juxtaposition de cruautés dit quelque chose du mal contemporain, en particulier la généralisation d’une violence frappant les populations dans les guerres civiles. Mais la vengeance perpétuelle peut-elle constituer la seule explication possible à ce conflit? Le spectateur accroché à son fauteuil voit les représailles qui s’enchaînent, sans ligne historique cohérente, la violence de la revanche devenant le moteur exclusif des conduits’ (Stora 2007). Stora’s criticism of *Ennemi intime* suggests that even the most recent, very direct attempts to confront the Algerian war are not necessarily successful in facilitating appropriate memory work.

[6] See *Trauma and Cinema* (Kaplan & Wang 2004) and more specifically in terms of cinematic representations of the Algerian war, ‘Trauma, Cinema and the Algerian War’ (Austin 2009).

[7] According to E. Ann Kaplan (*Trauma Culture*, 2005), cinematic works are indeed capable of making mourning possible to the viewer. She says: ‘Certain films may be pertinent in
constructing a position for the viewer that enables him or her to take responsibility’ (p. 123). She argues, for example, that films by Maya Deren and Tracy Moffat ‘arguably support Dominick LaCapra’s concept of ‘working through’ as mourning—an idea related to that of witnessing’ (p. 135).

[8] ‘Oui [ . . . ] parce que je ne voulais appuyer sur ce point-là. C’est, disons, ça élargit un peu le problème personnel sur un problème national parce que c’est aussi cette [sic] thème-là’ (Hanek 2006).

[9] In this sense, and as Peter Brunette (Michael Haneke, 2010), Oliver Speck (Funny Frames, 2010) and others have argued, Caché is perhaps only nominally about 17 October 1961. Indeed, Haneke himself has said: ‘Cette histoire se laissera conter dans beaucoup de pays. Le déclencheur peut-être politique qui est dedans, qui est dans Caché typiquement français, pourrait dans des [sic] autres pays naturellement être différent [ . . . ] mais on peut toujours raconter cette histoire dans n’importe quel pays. On va trouver une chose secret [sic] qui est cachée par le “common sense” du cette [sic] pays’ (2006).

[10] We learn this date thanks to a scene in the film that shows a television program announcing the naming of Barbara Contini as Italian governor of Nassiriyah in Iraq and the date, although that event actually took place in February 2004.

[11] E. Ann Kaplan (2005) argues that direct representation of trauma can itself be problematic if it is not appropriately contextualised and if it does not position the viewer in ways that ‘move the audience ethically, to expose the structure of injustice’ and that ‘invite viewers to take responsibility for related specific injustice’ (p. 135). Kaplan distinguishes between ‘empty empathy’ and ‘witnessing’ in media dealing with trauma. For her, witnessing ‘has to do with an art work producing a deliberate ethical consciousness [ . . . ] wanting to change the world’ (p. 122) whereas ‘empty empathy’ tends to be ‘elicited by images of suffering provided without a context or background knowledge’ (p. 93) and does not necessarily lead to an ethical response or a responsible reinvestment in the present.

[12] In this same issue of Screen, Martine Beugnet (2007) ends her article ‘Blind Spot’ with the unanswered question, ‘Does the emotion which Haneke, in his vision of middle-class France, repeatedly fends off, reach us, the spectators?’ (p. 231).

[13] As Libby Saxton (2007) has pointed out: ‘In his previous films Haneke has rigorously eschewed flashbacks on the grounds that they are liable to assume an explanatory function which oversimplifies and disambiguates reality’ (p. 10).


[17] It is important to note that Haneke deliberately deprives us of any real contact with Majid’s perspective. In the scenes in which Majid appears, he says very little about the past. Moreover, although Georges (and most viewers, perhaps) imagine Majid to be the sender of the
anonymous videotapes, Majid and his son consistently deny this. In fact, Libby Saxton (2007) has argued that ‘the positions occupied of the hidden video camera defy the logic of spatio-temporal continuity’ (p. 12), suggesting that it is Haneke himself who has planted the camera that took the anonymous footage, effectively stalking his own characters.


[19] Guy Austin (2007) has argued that the drawings allow Georges to at least ‘visualise the trauma’ of the past. Austin points out that, unlike the videotapes, which are devoid of any real content and are intended primarily to make Georges aware of the fact that he is being watched, the drawings ‘provokes Georges’ nightmarish flashbacks, a mixture of memory and fantasy that returns him to the events of October 1961’ (p. 533).

[20] Though, again, it is not possible to definitively assert that this sequence constitutes Georges’ dream. Because the scene goes uncommented in the present, it could represent a flashback to the past, a dream sequence (either Georges’ or Majid’s), or a conscious (and perhaps questionable) memory.

[21] ‘Moins la mémoire est vécue collectivement, plus elle a besoin d’hommes particuliers qui se font eux-mêmes des hommes-mémoire […] La psychologisation de la mémoire a donné à tout un chacun le sentiment que, de l’acquittement d’une dette impossible, dépendait finalement son salut’ (Nora 1992, p. 34).

[22] ‘I’m not sure if it’s so black and white. We don’t know if Georges is telling the truth and we don’t know if Majid is telling the truth. We don’t really know which one of the characters is lying—just as we don’t know in real life. You can’t say that the poor are only poor and good and the rich are only rich and evil. Life is far more complex and as a filmmaker and artist, I’m trying to explore the complexities and contradictions of life. I hope that, for that reason, the film is unsettling and disturbing—mainly because we don’t know how to react’ (Haneke in ‘Collective Guilt and Individual Responsibility: An Interview with Michael Haneke’, 2005a, p. 51).

[23] Haneke is known for criticising television and other forms of mainstream media. In an interview from 2005, he said: ‘There is a short scene in my film in which the literary debate is edited, where we see that reality is manipulated by TV to be more attractive to viewers; TV reproduces and transmits a vision of reality that is supposed to be more interesting to viewers, and I am glad that I was able to point that out in the film […] Yes, absolutely, there is the problem of the terrorism of the mass media today. There is the dictatorship of the dumbing down of our societies’ (Haneke 2005b).

[24] To emphasise perhaps the highly mediated nature of Georges’ TV show, Haneke includes in his film a scene showing him in the process of digitally editing one of his roundtable discussions about a book on the life and works of the French poet, Arthur Rimbaud. We see him erase one segment deemed too ‘theoretical’, and replace it with a discussion about Rimbaud’s homosexuality. By editing out of his show that which might be too abstract, he creates for his audience an illusion of transparency, a false sense that they are getting to know the ‘real’ Rimbaud, rather than the mediated Rimbaud as depicted through his poetry.

[25] Referring in particular to the first scene of the film, Saxton (2007) says: ‘We thus share, at least temporarily, the confusion and disorientation of a couple we encounter in the uncanny situation of watching themselves being watched. What is more, from the very outset of the film, we find ourselves already implicated, as spectators, in an economy of voyeurism and surveillance’ (p. 8).

[26] ‘I think his suicide represents a couple of things. First of all, it’s a desperate act of self-destruction. But it’s also an act of aggression against Georges. Interestingly, someone I know who saw the film recently recounted to me a story that he had heard. A man who had left his wife was asked by her to meet him at a subway station. They met, and while he was there, she...
threw herself under subway car before his eyes. I think that’s an interesting comment on my film’ (Haneke 2005a, p. 51).

[27] Indeed, Majid’s suicide can be seen as evoking the decapitation videos distributed on the Internet by terrorist groups, intended to shock people into considering terrorist demands.

[28] ‘Michael Haneke est vraiment imbattable sur le terrain de la représentation de la plus grande violence de la manière la moins spectaculaire’ (Chakali 2006).

[29] Barbash and Taylor (1997) define the term pro-filmic as, ‘the multitude of processes and activities that actually happened in the shooting of the film, some of which were recorded, others of which were missed, ignored, unknown, concealed, or denied. So if you used special lights to illuminate a scene but kept them out of frame because you didn’t want your spectators to know you used them, they’d be part of the pro-filmic but not the filmic. Or if you cut between two shots of your main protagonist that were filmed on two different days, but manage to make it look as if the two shots represent a continuation of a single action, set at the same time and same place, the two different events (“what really happened”) would be part of the pro-filmic, and the synthesis into a single event as implied by the cut would be the filmic: it would be a connotation of the film’ (p. 8).

References


