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Unknown Knowns:

Michael Haneke's *Caché* and the Failure of Allegory

In a 2005 interview, Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke offers a controversial remark about his recently-released film *Caché*, which tells the story of a Parisian couple unsettled by the appearance of mysterious videotapes and drawings at their home.¹ When asked about his inspiration for the film, Haneke recalls the shock he experienced upon seeing in 2001 a documentary film about the night of October 17, 1961, in Paris. The film, screened on the Franco-German television station Arte, recounted the violent attacks by Parisian police forces on unarmed North African immigrants engaged in a peaceful demonstration in the city's streets, resulting in hundreds of fatalities. Haneke was moved, according to interviews, to weave this historical moment into his film about a twenty-first-century bourgeois intellectual family as an example of the potential links between national censorship, collective guilt, and family secrets. In this essay I examine Haneke's turn to allegory in *Caché*, and the intense and divergent critical responses to the film prompted by that turn. I am particularly interested in the ethical questions raised in these critiques concerning Haneke's use of the October 1961 massacre. Also at stake in this debate, I argue, is an artistic failure that stems from the intransigent friction between

¹ *Caché*, dir. by Michael Haneke (Les Films du Losange, 2005); Richard Porton, 'Collective Guilt and Individual Responsibility: An Interview with Michael Haneke', *Cinéaste*, 31 (2005), 50–51 (p. 50). I would like to thank Michael Gorra for reading an early version of this essay and the participants of the seminar on memory at the Kahn Liberal Arts Institute at Smith College.

disavowed narratives of Franco-Algerian history and the formal conditions of the modern allegorical mode.

Haneke's comment is controversial partly because the historical event selected by the filmmaker is one that has undergone particularly forceful and tangled layers of censorship and distortion. The extent of the violence unleashed upon the demonstrators in October 1961 was immediately denied by police, led by the then Paris police chief Maurice Papon, and received sparse or muffled media coverage in the days following. State censorship and fear of reprisals kept witnesses silent or silenced, and members of the North African community, reluctant to revisit or disclose their horrific experiences, refrained from discussing them even within their own families. These political, social, and psychological impetuses coalesced to form a web of collective amnesia that persisted long after the event itself, paralleling the national silence concerning the Algerian War of Independence and exacerbating the sense that French North Africans have been written out of national collective memory.² Indeed, France's 1964 amnesty

² See Jim House and Neil MacMaster, "'Une Journée Portée Disparue': The Paris Massacre of 1961 and Memory," in *Crisis and Renewal in France, 1918–1962*, ed. by Kenneth Mouré and Martin S. Alexander (Oxford: Berghahn, 2002), pp. 267–90; Anne Tristan, *Le Silence du fleuve: Ce crime que nous n'avons toujours pas nommé* (Montigny-les-Cormeilles: Au nom de la mémoire, 1991), pp. 9–11; and Brigitte Gaïti, 'Les Ratés de l'histoire: le 17 octobre 1961 à Paris', *Sociétés Contemporaines*, 18/19 (1994), 11–37. Historian Benjamin Stora has written extensively on collective amnesia concerning the Algerian War of Independence; see for example *La Gangrène et l'oubli* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991). It should be noted that there is variation in the assessments of this amnesia; see in particular Joshua Cole, 'Remembering the Battle of Paris: 17 October 1961 in French and Algerian Memory', *French Politics, Culture &*

bill erasing political crimes committed during the Algerian War included the events of October 17, 1961, in its purview. Later, as the archives were finally opened, as major political figures acknowledged the massacre through public discourse or commemorations, and as the relevant corpus of film, literature, visual arts and music grew larger, in 2001 the event still remained obscured enough for a well-informed, politically conscious European intellectual such as Michael Haneke to be taken off guard.³ The ‘shock’ expressed by Haneke in interviews is twofold: it is a response to the horror of the event itself and to its forty-year invisibility.

The question of representing the collective trauma of October 17, 1961, is a charged one, to say the least, and *how* Haneke chose to weave it into his film thereby becomes a subject of heated debate. As it happens, Haneke gives the ‘event’ itself minimal screen time, passing over its details in just a few seconds in order, it seems, to secure its exemplary function as a tale of national guilt or shame. The filmmaker discusses the film’s genesis in a number of interviews, repeating in various versions the account of his ‘discovery’ of the events of October 17, 1961,

Society, 21.3 (2003), 21–50; and Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 159–99.

³ For bibliographies of literary and cultural representations of the event, see Alison Rice, ‘Rehearsing October 17, 1961: The Role of Fiction in Remembering in the Battle of Paris’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 54.4 (2014), 90–102; Lia Brozgal, ‘In the Absence of the Archive (Paris, October 17, 1961)’, *South Central Review* 31.1 (2014), 34–54; Anne Donadey, ‘Anamnesis and National Reconciliation: Re-membering October 17, 1961’, *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, ed. by Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001), pp. 47–56; and Seth Graebner, ‘Remembering 17 October 1961 and the Novels of Rachid Boudjedra’, *Research in African Literatures*, 36 (2005), 172–97.

but insisting on the secondary importance of these events in the greater scheme of the film.⁴

When asked by Karin Schiefer about the role of the ‘war in Algeria’ in the film, for example, he declares: ‘I don’t want to call too much attention to this issue because I don’t want the film to be regarded primarily in that light at Cannes. It’s only an element which supplies the framework’.⁵

The desire to micromanage the interpretation of his film (specifically that of the audience at the Cannes Film Festival screening, in this case) should be enough to keep us from assigning too much weight to the paratextual comments of a work’s author, but Haneke’s directive seems to form a telling parallel to the formal inscription of October 17, 1961, into his film. The event (its symbolic scope notwithstanding, as will be discussed further) is relegated to the margin, emerging and disappearing just as quickly to cede its place to the film’s central narrative of family secrets and personal shame.

It is this functional role that poses a problem when it is precisely the suppression of information surrounding the event that compounds – or ought to compound – the intensity of the collective guilt dramatized in the film. Among the critiques of this aspect of Haneke’s film, Paul Gilroy’s brief but incisive piece in the *Screen* dossier on *Caché* offers a particularly judicious and moving assessment of the ethical problems raised. In an effort to parse his ‘hostile’ reaction to the film and its ‘antipolitical [...] engagement with profound contemporary problems,’ Gilroy

⁴ Karen Schiefer, ‘Michael Haneke Talks About *Caché*’, *AFC-Austrian Films* (May 2005), <www.austrianfilms.com/news/en/body michael_haneke_talks_about_cachbody> [accessed 15 December 2018]; Porton, p. 50; Michel Cieutat and Philippe Rouyer, ‘Entretien avec Michael Haneke’, *Positif*, 531 (2005), 21–25 (p. 22).

⁵ Schiefer, ‘Michael Haneke Talks about *Caché*’, para. 4 of 11.

cites the representation of the October 1961 massacre as a significant element of what he calls the film's bad faith:

What I took to be an overly casual citation of the 1961 anti-Arab pogrom by Papon's police in Paris encapsulated some of these problems. That unmourned and unremembered real event does a lot of narrative work for Haneke. Many people involved in building a habitable multicultural Europe will feel that there are pressing issues of morality and responsibility involved in raising that history only to reduce it to nothing more than a piece of tragic machinery in the fatal antagonism that undoes *Caché*'s protagonists. The dead deserve better than that passing acknowledgement.⁶

Through this lens, Haneke's film seems to repeat the censorship to which the event has already been subjected, hurriedly moving on from the historical fact of the event to the 'larger' ethical and psychological questions at hand. Gilroy's comments uncover a quantity of narrative *work* (accomplished by the event as alluded to in the film) that manages to be strangely disproportionate to the narrative *importance* the event has in the film.

It is this imbalance, this tension between form and representation, that strikes me as I try to understand the relationship between the October 1961 massacre and Haneke's film. What seems particularly discordant is the complex meditation on silence and censorship offered by *Caché*. As its title suggests, the film circles thematically around what is undisclosed, around facts, memories, or secrets that characters keep from themselves or from others. In line with

⁶ Paul Gilroy, 'Shooting Crabs in a Barrel', *Screen*, 48 (2007), 233–35 (p. 233).

Haneke's penchant for spectator implication, the theme of concealment also points to the work's hermeneutic drive, most emblematically in its enigmatic final scene which many have read as a puzzle that is impossible to solve.⁷ In what follows I look briefly at the film's inscription of concealment and disavowal as a commentary on the representational aftermath of October 17, 1961, before turning to the question of allegory as the mode that supports this interpretation of the film. For if Gilroy eloquently exposes an ethical injustice at the heart of *Caché*'s formal composition, his critique also reveals the way in which Haneke's film fails to fulfill its formal desire for elliptical representation. The failure of allegory, I argue, puts the film into a strange alliance with Gilroy's critique, in that this formal impasse relates precisely to the historical specificity of the October 1961 massacre, and ultimately inculcates the collective amnesia surrounding the event.

Streets Unseen: The Disappearance of October 17, 1961

⁷ See Todd Herzog, 'The Banality of Surveillance: Michael Haneke's *Caché* and Life after the End of Privacy', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 43.2 (2010), 25–40. On spectator implication in *Caché*, see Brian Gibson, 'Bearing Witness: The Dardenne Brothers' and Michael Haneke's Implication of the Viewer', *CineAction*, 70 (2006), 25–38; Catherine Wheatley, *Caché (Hidden)* (London: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 85–86; and Mireille Rosello, *The Reparative in Narratives: Works of Mourning in Progress* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 103. Wheatley has traced the thread of this aspect of Haneke's work through many of his other films, including *Funny Games* (1997), *Code Inconnu* (2000), *Le Pianiste* (2001), and *Le Temps du loup* (2003); see *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), pp. 78–151.

With its perfect thematic storm of bourgeois intellectual culpability, technological self-referentiality, and discursive indeterminacy, Haneke's *Caché* quickly generated a vigorous critical response on both sides of the Atlantic. Haneke is well known for finding ingenious and disconcerting ways of undercutting the viewer's complacency, insisting on exposing the viewer's position in relation to the thematic and structural material of his films. *Caché* represents a particularly striking example of what Catherine Wheatley has called moral spectatorship because it combines a postcolonial political context with an acute experience of interpretive uncertainty on the part of the viewer.⁸ As Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars note in their introduction to the *Screen* dossier in which Gilroy's critique appeared, the film, with its apparently unsolvable puzzles, may be compelling not so much for what it says but because of the great range of responses it has generated.⁹ In a sense, we could say that, with *Caché*, Haneke has managed to extend his trademark implication of the viewer to the realm of film criticism, as each interpretation of the film functions as an indicator of the viewer's particular preoccupations. Thus we see a divide between Anglo-American and French critical readings of the film that, as Ipek A. Celik argues, may have everything to do with the film's release in 2005, the year of widespread riots in protest against the deaths of two teenagers of North African and Sub-Saharan descent in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois.¹⁰ Haneke's attention to the mechanics of

⁸ Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema*, p. 153.

⁹ Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars, "Introduction," *Screen*, 48 (2007), 211–213 (p. 211).

¹⁰ Celik proposes that, while the Anglo-American press readily interpreted the film as a French national allegory, French critics tended to downplay the national specificity of the film's references to guilt and responsibility ("I Wanted You to Be Present": Guilt and the History of Violence in Michael Haneke's *Caché*', *Cinema Journal*, 50.1 (2010), 59–80 (pp. 65–69, 79)).

filming and filmmaking, meanwhile, has generated a range of readings that foreground *Caché*'s formal composition, from James Penney's edifying analysis of vision and cinematic space to Catherine Wheatley's examination of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* produced by the layered screens and media in *Caché*.¹¹

Among these screen images are those captured on the videotapes that arrive mysteriously – sometimes accompanied by childlike drawings of violent images – at the home of the film's protagonist, Georges (played by Daniel Auteuil), the television host of a literary talk show. Surveillance and terror thus form another key focus in critical readings of the film, which posit technology as an embodiment of the shifting boundaries between public and private space in postcolonial Europe.¹² The videotapes Georges receives suggest surveillance at a technical level in that the footage they present is unedited and filmed from a fixed position. They also imply surveillance at the psychological level in that they impose an exposure and loss of privacy to an unknown viewer. The first tape, presenting two hours' worth of footage of the street outside the Parisian home where Georges lives with his wife Anne (played by Juliette Binoche) and his teenage son Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky), is alarming not for its content but because of its existence. Subsequent videos disturb Georges's complacency further by presenting locations and events known to very few people (his childhood home, a confrontation with a childhood friend

¹¹ See James Penney, "'You Never Look at Me From Where I See You': Postcolonial Guilt in *Caché*", *New Formations*, 70 (2010), 77–93; and Wheatley, *Caché*, p. 72. Wheatley's synthesis of critical responses to the film in *Caché* (pp. 16–17) serves as a testament to the wide-ranging concerns at hand in this scholarship.

¹² On this point, see Herzog and also Jennifer Burris, 'Surveillance and the Indifferent Gaze in Michael Haneke's *Caché*', *Studies in French Cinema*, 11 (2011), 151–63.

inside that man's apartment), while his lines of privacy are further encroached upon by the delivery of one of the incriminating tapes to his superior at work and of one of the drawings to his son at school. Later, the discursive levels of the film become blurred so that it is not clear if we are watching additional 'surveillance' footage or a rendition of the protagonist's memory shot using the same techniques as those in the surveillance video.

The privacy that has been disrupted by these tapes encompasses a particular event in Georges's past when, as a child of six, he prevented the adoption by his parents of Majid, the son of the North African immigrants working in his family's home, by falsely accusing Majid of a violent attack. The symbolism of this gesture is clear for a global, post-9/11 audience: the fantasy of violence is projected onto the Arab other, justifying his expulsion from the European family whose bloodlines thereby remain intact. Intensifying this symbolism is the reason for the potential adoption of Majid: his parents were apparently among the many victims of the police aggression that took place in Paris on October 17, 1961. While he suspects the adult Majid of being his surveillance 'terrorist', however, Georges is unable to definitively establish the source of the accusations embodied by the videotapes, and thus unable to confront an identifiable accuser. As we see in the opening scene, in which Georges walks out into the street to attempt to determine the vantage point from which the first videotape was filmed, the very existence of the tapes defies technology: there is no place within the diegesis of the film where the surveillance camera could have been located. The eye of surveillance is an impossible eye, and blame for the 'terrorizing' acts is thus impossible to establish.

Less attention has been given to the topic of public space in Haneke's film, but this forms a particularly interesting intersection with the film's dramatization of surveillance and censorship. Public space – especially the street – as an arena for the uneasy encounter between strangers separated by gender, class, and race is a regular theme in Haneke's work, and *Caché*,

with its inclusion of a brief altercation between the harried Georges and a black man (Diouc Koma) who nearly runs into him on his bicycle, is no exception in this respect. But the film's opening scene also presents an image of public space: the Paris street that, because of the fact of its being filmed and the way in which it is filmed, comes to function for Georges and Anne as a private space that has been violated by the unidentifiable camera. The first videotape is unsettling in that it marks the selection of a specific address in Paris amongst the countless spots publicly available to human and digital eyes, thus aligning the proliferation of public spaces in the city with the potential ubiquity of surveillance. The fact that Georges is a public figure, appearing regularly via technology in the living rooms of strangers, further highlights the shifting boundaries between private and public space in Haneke's film.

Of course, the barely mentioned event at the heart of the film – the police massacre of October 17, 1961 – was also, in mass scale, a racially charged struggle in the street. It was in a sense a struggle *for* the street: the demonstration by over twenty thousand men, women, and children was a protest against a wartime curfew imposed by Papon that 'advised most urgently' and 'strongly recommended' (as outright prohibition would have left Papon vulnerable to charges of discrimination) that Algerian workers abstain from circulating 'in the streets of Paris' after 8:30 p.m. and that 'French Muslims' circulate alone rather than in groups.¹³ The demonstration organized by the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*, the political wing of Algeria's nationalist movement) was at once a demand for independence, a condemnation of

¹³ Papon issued his official statement on October 5, 1961: 'Il est très vivement recommandé aux Français musulmans de circuler isolément, les petits groupes risquant de paraître suspects aux rondes et patrouilles de police' (*Le 17 octobre 1961 par les textes de l'époque* (Paris: Association Sortir du colonialisme, 2011), p. 37).

racial discrimination, and a claim to the streets. The police's disposal of bodies into the Seine River, meanwhile, serves as an all too literal gesture of eradication, ridding the city's public spaces of its undesirable inhabitants. Jacques Rancière describes the repression of October 17, 1961, as a double black-out, a 'cleansing' by police of public space ('nettoyage policier') that was in turn rendered invisible.¹⁴

While Haneke's insistent juxtaposition of past and present in his film surely does demand a reflection on national history, I believe it also prompts a reflection on the history of technology and on the importance of that technological history to the Franco-Algerian relationship indexed by the film. In *Caché*'s penultimate scene, we see a screaming Majid's forced departure from Georges's parents' home in 1961 through a fixed camera placed at a distance from the action.¹⁵ It is possible to read this temporal juxtaposition, as many have, as the structure for a study of personal guilt and shame, and allegorically as the portrait of national, postcolonial guilt and shame. But to the extent that the film also suggests a meditation on technology, in particular on the technology of surveillance, the alternation between past and present also reminds us of the contrast between the surveillance tools available in 2005, at the time that the film was made, and those available in 1961. The formal resemblance between the view of Georges's childhood memory and the film's opening shot of the adult Georges's home in Paris, in other words, suggests not only an uncanny merging between Georges's perspective and surveillance but also

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière, 'La Cause de l'autre', *Lignes*, 30 (1997), 36–49 (p. 42).

¹⁵ As critics have noted, the juxtaposition of this scene with the preceding one in which Georges takes a sleeping pill and withdraws into his bed implies that the childhood scene is a flashback generated by Georges's memory, its fixed-camera presentation suggesting a merging between surveillance filming and Georges's consciousness. See Burris, p. 159; and Herzog, p. 35.

the anachronism of technology: if the eye of surveillance proves physically impossible to locate in the film's first scene, its uncanniness in the penultimate scene arises from the implied presence of a fixed camera in a rural setting in 1961.

This temporal incongruity serves to underscore the notion of the October 1961 massacre as an incident of suppressed witnessing: the collective 'eye' that viewed these events has been erased by state censorship, shame, and horror. Indeed, if we view the film's opening scene in light of the historical context selected by Haneke for this film, what is striking about that first videotape is the silence and emptiness of the Paris street. Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars note in their contribution to the *Screen* dossier on *Caché* that the soundtracks for the film's first and penultimate scenes are identical except for Majid's screams which are edited out of the first scene.¹⁶ This detail serves as a chilling reference to the suppression of North African voices and lives in October 1961. But it also points at yet another level to the inscription of an anachronistic technology into the narrative of a past crime, reminding us through the disjuncture of sound of the improbability that Georges's childhood secret was recorded.

If we read *Caché* as a highly equivocal revenge tale with no victor, the story it tells of public space is similarly charged. For although the film turns the gaze back onto colonial history, invoking the scopic realm of twenty-first technology to do so, *Caché* also tells of the *absence* of that technology in 1961. Just as the penultimate farmhouse scene clashes with its formal presentation, the public spaces being claimed by the October 1961 demonstrators were not subject to the ubiquitous surveillance technologies available in 2005. The paucity of recorded images of the events facilitated state censorship and denials of violence in ways that would not

¹⁶ Ezra and Sillars, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Bringing Terror Home', *Screen*, 48 (2007), 215-21 (pp. 220-21).

have been possible in 2005 (as is evident in the coverage of the riots that broke out that year – riots that prompted President Jacques Chirac’s cabinet to revive state-of-emergency powers, including the imposition of curfews, not in use since the Algerian War). It is difficult to imagine a large-scale demonstration in a major city occurring in the twenty-first century without the ubiquitous presence of the kind of ‘self-surveillance’ that would turn countless anonymous camera eyes onto the actions of the police, precisely because they were taking place in the city’s public spaces. The film’s opening scene, then, is eerie for all of the reasons that have already been cited – it troubles the boundaries between private and public, it upsets the conventions of spectatorship, it signals an enigma with no clear solution – and for one more: it comes 44 years too late, filming an empty Paris street when the bodies and screams that filled the city on the night of October 17, 1961, had long since disappeared.

Allegory’s Ellipsis

It is through allegorical representation that Haneke’s film captures in disturbingly incisive terms the collective amnesia surrounding the trauma of October 17, 1961. Indeed, the invocation of allegory in interpreting the film’s key tropes has been one of the dominant critical responses to the film. Here the ostensibly void political landscape of *Caché* is compensated, in a sense, by the potential symbolic reach of a medley of elusive hints: the subject of the news broadcasts playing on Anne and Georges Laurent’s television set, the title of a book on Georges’s shelf, the identity of a guest on his talk show, the brief reference to October 17, 1961.¹⁷ Taking this last reference

¹⁷ T. Jefferson Kline examines the broadcasts on the Laurents’ television, parsing the series of “tele-intrusions” in the film for their intermittent commentary on the contemporary war on terror (*Unraveling French Cinema: From l’Atalante to Caché* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2010), pp.

as the allegorical prompt, we can read Georges, the bourgeois everyman (Haneke uses the same character names, Georges and Anne, in multiple films as if to underscore their generic dimension), as the stand-in for a guilty nation plagued by the repressed memory of a horrendous injustice and refusing to take responsibility for its crimes. The anxieties of surveillance generated by the anonymous delivery of videotapes suggest a reversal of the colonial gaze: France, incarnated by Georges, is shocked out of its middle-class liberal complacency, and becomes an object exposed to sanction by an unknown authority. The film's many diegetic tricks and its enigmatic closing scene (in which Georges's and Majid's sons appear to know each other), meanwhile, seem to underscore the impossibility of determining culpability for the 1961 massacre, and thus to preclude any suggestion of redemption. Indeed, through the lens of this allegorical reading, *Caché*'s lack of 'closure' puts forward a forceful postcolonial critique in its implicit refusal to resolve questions of accountability or authority, so that the spectre of October 17, 1961 is, like the film, a puzzle that cannot be solved, and hence a crime that cannot be absolved.

173–76). Patrick Crowley reads the placement of Henri Amouroux's *La Grande histoire des Français sous l'occupation* in the film as a reference that links up Vichy France with a general structure of guilt ('When Forgetting is Remembering: Haneke's *Caché* and the Events of October 17, 1961', *On Michael Haneke*, ed. by Brian Price and John David Rhodes (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 267–79 (p. 271)). Catherine Wheatley argues that the brief glimpse of Mazarine Pinget as a guest on Georges's talk show is a coded reference to François Mitterand's duplicity with the French public, and, for a select audience, "a poignant evocation of the painful intersection between the political and the personal" (*Caché*, 68).

Haneke has claimed that *Caché*'s story could have taken place anywhere.¹⁸ Allegory's dialectical structure enables readings of Georges's ambiguous culpability as a reflection on the police massacre of 1961, more generally on France's relationship with Algeria, on French colonial injustices across the globe, on xenophobia in postcolonial Europe, or, as Oliver Speck contends, on 'practically every urban setting throughout the first world.'¹⁹ By the same token, a range of other shameful, collectively disavowed, mnemonically compromised events besides the police massacre could have served the desired function in Haneke's vision. However gratifying the indictment of postcolonial racism, the recourse to allegory in the representation of October 17, 1961, presents its own ethical problems, as the particular history of that event becomes a pretext rather than a subject in the narrative structure of the film. On the one hand, allegorical interpretation seems to counter the impulse to silence by offering a means to accord the full symbolic weight of the film's message to the police massacre and its suppression. But on the other hand, it does not address the fact that the representative space of the massacre itself is reduced to nearly nothing, and that the vital specificity of that event is necessarily suppressed.

The quantitative representation of the particular historical event that generates the ethically gratifying allegorical reading has in fact been a crucial criterion in assessing the now

¹⁸ See Cieutat and Rouyer, p. 22, Porton, p. 50, and Benjamin Stora, 'Entretien entre Michael Haneke et Benjamin Stora, à propos du film *Caché*,' *La Vie* (4 October 2005)

<<https://benjaminstora.univ-paris13.fr/index.php/articlesrecents/limage/318-entretien-entre-michael-haneke-et-benjamin-stora-in-lhebdomadaire-la-vie-4-octobre-2005-a-propos-du-film-qcacheq22.html> > [accessed 15 December 2018].

¹⁹ Oliver Speck, *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 98.

extensive corpus of literary and cinematic responses to the events of October 1961. To the extent that this body of work constitutes, as Lia Brozgal proposes, an ‘anarchive’ of October 17, 1961, the relationship between the historical event and the direct representation of that event is of fundamental importance. Brozgal argues that such texts as Didier Daeninckx’s 1983 detective novel *Meurtres pour mémoire* and Mehdi Lallaoui’s 2001 novel *Une Nuit d’octobre*, works that engage directly and at length not only with the event of October 17, 1961, but with the particular problem of blocked access to archives, fulfill an ‘archival function’ in that they ‘constitute a collection of traces that refer to real past events and participate in the production of knowledge about those events.’²⁰ She uses the term anarchive to demarcate the entire corpus of literary and cultural production concerning October 1961 as ‘a set of works that evince an archival function and that, together, produce an epistemological system in opposition to an official archive’ (p. 50). Similarly, Anne Donadey places relevant works published since the 1980s in a project of ‘anamnesis,’ or collective remembrance, of this censored historical event (p. 48). The burden of representation thus takes on a particular force in the case of this corpus, as these texts are part of an ethical project of exposure and dissemination.

In terms of the proportion of text accorded to the relation of events and circumstances surrounding October 17, 1961, Haneke’s film seems to sit at the extreme end of this corpus. *Caché* forms a striking contrast, for example, to another film released the same year, Alain Tasma’s *Nuit noire: le 17 octobre 1961*, which offers a painstakingly detailed account of the events leading up to and including the massacre told through the experiences of fictional

²⁰ Brozgal, p. 46; Daniel Daeninckx, *Meurtres pour mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983); Mehdi Lallaoui, *Une Nuit d’octobre* (Paris: Editions alternatives, 2001).

Algerian immigrants.²¹ Other texts evoking the October 1961 massacre have also come under scrutiny for not giving enough emphasis or narrative space to the event: Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire*, for example, is often credited with bringing the massacre to the attention of mainstream French readers, but its shift in setting from October 1961 to the Holocaust after the first two chapters has also been read as a further example of eclipsing the massacre.²² In the case of Haneke's film, the pendulum swings ever wider: while through certain allegorical readings we can argue that the entire film is 'about' October 1961, it is equally possible to counter that the film is instead 'about' a great many other things, and, with October 1961 reduced to a fortuitous

²¹ *Nuit noire: le 17 octobre 1961*, dir. by Alain Tasma (Cipango, 2005). Alison Rice reads the relative brevity of the scene depicting the massacre's violence in Tasma's film as an indication of the 'impossibility of truly representing the horrors that took place' (p. 99); as I discuss below, this notion is not unrelated to the function of allegorical representation in this context. See also Kline, p. 168.

²² See Fiona Barclay, *Writing Postcolonial France: Haunting, Literature, and the Maghreb* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 49, and Donadey, p. 50. This critique of Daeninckx's novel links up with a larger context of what Benjamin Stora and others characterize as a kind of commemorative competition between World War II and the Algerian War in France, where the former always eclipses the latter (see Rice, pp. 90–92). On the role of October 17, 1961, in the 'globalization of Holocaust memory' (p. 230), see Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

narrative device, problematically *not* about this politically fraught and censored historical event.²³

This debate is fundamental to the allegorical mode, where a narrative necessarily is and is not about the story being told. Allegory generates a doubled interpretive experience: a first-level ‘literal’ meaning and a secondary symbolic meaning. These meanings never meet but remain in a state of shimmering independence, the secondary meaning produced only through the act of interpretation by those who hold the necessary decoding key, and left unseen by all others. Hence the affinity between modern allegory and alienation, and the element of self-destruction in this parallel construction: the allegorical meaning seems to turn a text back into itself, the secondary meaning insisting, as Paul de Man’s deconstructive reading puts it, on the ‘unreadability’ of the prior narration.²⁴ The ever unconfirmable activity of decoding, meanwhile, produces a kind of perpetual hermeneutic motion machine, repeatedly circling back to reveal and conceal a text’s meaning. Allegory’s dramatization of reading and interpretation makes the mode a particularly fitting one for *Caché*, a film that in many ways is about decoding, or about the impossibility of a definitive interpretive landscape that might enable that decoding.²⁵ As critics

²³ Patrick Crowley opens his essay with the claim that ‘*Caché* is and is not a film about the events that occurred in Paris on October 17, 1961’ (p. 267). For dismissals of the national allegory reading of the film, see for example Peter Brunette, *Michael Haneke* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p. 122; and Speck, p. 98.

²⁴ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 205.

²⁵ Fredric Jameson posits that allegory ‘begins by acknowledging the impossibility of interpretation’ (*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP,

have noted, this frustration of the spectator's interpretive authority also fits Haneke's œuvre as a whole, and, in the case of *Caché*, threatens to make the viewer complicit with the violence they are witnessing.²⁶

In addition to the expression of a charged relationship between filmmaker and spectator, however, there are other compelling qualities offered by the allegorical mode, notably in cases of political tension, censorship, and collective trauma. Political allegory offers the possibility of veiled critique, the incrimination of contemporary figures or events protected by the use of implicit narrative. The mode can be a defensive tactic for both the author and the critique, as a means to avoid violent reprisals or censorship of the text. Moreover, given the uncertainty and instability inherent in the mode, allegory also answers the need for an oblique representation of 'difficult' or unpopular subjects when a direct gaze might be too painful to bear, and can capture eloquently the layers of secrecy, shame, and attenuated memory at work in instances of individual or collective trauma.²⁷

1991), p. 168), while Maureen Quilligan writes that 'all true narrative allegory has its source in a culture's attitude toward language, and in that attitude, as embodied in the language itself, allegory finds the limits of its possibility' (*The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 15).

²⁶ See note 7.

²⁷ See Joel Fineman, 'The Structure of Allegorical Desire', *Allegory and Representation*, ed. by Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 26–60 (p. 28). On this topic in the context of the Second World War and Algeria, see Philip Watts, *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals in France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); and Debarati Sanyal,

Because allegory sits at the limits of representation, we could also argue a particular kinship with conceptualizations of traumatic experience arising from the field of trauma studies, where trauma is pitted precisely against representation. In the context of the Holocaust, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and others have proposed that traumatic experience is defined by a psychological and epistemological break in the face of an event so horrific as to defy human comprehension or individual understanding.²⁸ This break results in the non-recording or non-experience of the traumatic event. Claude Lanzmann goes further in suggesting that representing the Holocaust is not only impossible but ethically problematic, in that it would normalize an unfathomable event through narrative.²⁹ Beyond the pleasure of unsettling a complacent spectator or reader, then, the elliptical nature of allegory holds an ethical purchase. Allegorical narrative can provide an artistic response consonant with the representative challenges raised by collective trauma: the inscription of mnemonic uncertainty, the verbalized distrust of language, the expression of the inexpressible.

The correlated risk is of course that the unspoken narrative will be unheard. Because a text's allegorical meaning is severed from the first-level one, its existence depends entirely on the collective interpretive act of its readers: a collective epistemology concerning the ideas,

'Crabwalk History: Torture, Allegory, and Memory in Sartre', *Yale French Studies*, 118/119 (2010), 52–71.

²⁸ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992); Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

²⁹ Claude Lanzmann, 'Hier ist kein warum', *Au sujet de Shoah: le film de Claude Lanzmann*, ed. by Michel Deguy (Paris: Belin, 1990), p. 279.

figures, or events being indexed by the allegorical text must be in place. And this, I would argue, is precisely what is missing in the case of October 17, 1961. Despite repeated evocations of the massacre in literature, art, and the public sphere, and despite the wealth of information available online (which now includes accounts and reproductions of previously inaccessible archival materials), there is still not the requisite *certainty* concerning widespread knowledge about the massacre to allow for a ‘true’ allegory of the event: one that would leave out entirely the narrative of the event itself and depend on its readers to generate that second-level interpretation. A text, in other words, cannot be both ‘about’ and ‘not about’ October 17, 1961, in the strictest rendering of the allegorical mode.

What has been overlooked in scholarship on Haneke’s film, then, is the fact that *Caché* is not a true allegory of October 17, 1961, in that it includes an explicit reference to the event.³⁰ This disjuncture explains Haneke’s awkward disavowals of the event’s ‘importance’ in and to his films, as it could be argued that his impatience in interviews stems from the desire to have left out any reference to October 17, 1961, altogether. While with Paul Gilroy I would assume formal reasons to be stronger than ethical reasons for this desire, what interests me is the crisis of epistemology that produces both the formal tear in *Caché* and the critical backlash against the representation of October 17, 1961, in the film. For the brief mention of the 1961 police massacre that prevents *Caché* from realizing a true allegory of that event generates one of the most formally and discursively jarring scenes in the film. The repressed ambivalence of the scene, as I explore below, speaks volumes about the layers of knowledge, ignorance, bad faith, and censorship surrounding the narrative of October 17, 1961, and identifies that history as an epistemological impasse that exposes the limits of allegory’s reparative potential.

³⁰ For a summary of critical responses to the film, see Wheatley, *Caché*, pp. 15-17.

Epistemologies of the Unspeakable

How many people know what happened on the night of October 17, 1961, in Paris? Those who were living in Paris at the time but were not direct witnesses might harbour memories or awareness, while younger generations would have to have acquired the knowledge indirectly through family, friends, the media, cultural representation, or by accident.³¹ Recent decades mark a new era in that information about the event is *available* in unprecedented ways, but to be available and to be disseminated, known, acknowledged or remembered is not the same thing.³²

³¹ As Fiona Barclay notes, *L'Humanité* published the results of an opinion poll in October 2001 finding that 47% of respondents had heard of the October 1961 massacre (p. 64). The paper also breaks that figure down into subsets of those who knew 'precisely' what had happened and those with only vague notions, along with responses filtered by age group ('17 octobre', *L'Humanité* (13 October 2001) <www.humanite.fr/node/253800> [accessed 15 February 2018]).

³² The reflections of Seth Graebner (pp. 173–74) and Mireille Rosello (pp. 104–05) speak eloquently to the disjunctures of knowledge, awareness, and memory concerning October 17, 1961. The phrase “unknown knows” in my title is a reference to Slavoj Žižek’s corrective response to Donald Rumsfeld: “What he forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the ‘unknown knows’, things we don’t know that we know – which is precisely the Freudian unconscious. If Rumsfeld thought that the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq were the ‘unknown knows’, the threats from Saddam we did not even suspect, the Abu Ghraib scandal shows where the main dangers actually are in the ‘unknown knows’, the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values” (‘The Empty Wheelbarrow’, *The Guardian* (February 19, 2005)

And, in the absence of record, verifying that information is ultimately impossible. As Joshua Cole demonstrates, the participation of historian Jean-Luc Einaudi in the 1997 trial of Maurice Papon for crimes against humanity generated a rush of attention to Einaudi's work on October 17, 1961, and in particular to the 'numbers debate' concerning fatalities on that night, but this renewed attention failed to bring factual clarification (p. 27).³³ On the other hand, the urgent impulse to expose this injustice can produce its own distortions, notably in the overdetermination of the single date that fails to place the night of October 17, 1961, into the larger context of the Algerian War, of escalating violence and hostilities between North Africans and police in Paris, and of colonial history.³⁴ But what is clear, and what allegory reveals, is the lack of certainty regarding this collective awareness. There is some – more than before – but not enough visible and disseminated information about October 17, 1961, to generate the necessary readership of informed interpreters. The collective 'competent reader' who would provide the decoder ring to unlock the allegorical narrative of October 17, 1961, does not exist.³⁵

<www.theguardian.com/comment/story/0,3604,1417982,00.html> [accessed 15 December 2018], para 4 of 11).

³³ Cole cogently points out that the epistemological uncertainties surrounding the event can be politically useful in attempts to dismiss it (p. 23). See also Graebner, p. 174.

³⁴ See Barclay, p. 63; Cole, p. 24; and Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 13–14.

³⁵ I take the term 'competent reader' from James Clifford's work on ethnographic allegory ('On Ethnographic Allegory', *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography*, ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 98–121 (p. 110)).

This epistemological aporia is arrestingly captured in the single scene in *Caché* that explicitly mentions October 17, 1961. Georges, backed into a corner by his increasingly distrusting and disapproving wife, forces himself to tell Anne (part of) the childhood event from 1961 that has been dug up by the videotapes, drawings, and encounters with the adult Majid and his grown son. Because the police massacre serves as the symbolic impetus for Georges's story of personal and family guilt, it must be named here. Yet Georges's deep reluctance to reveal what has been hidden acts as a telling overlay to the filmmaker's reluctance to accord 'too much importance' to the historical event itself, so that its rendering is effected through gritted teeth in a stiff, strangled set of sentences whose utterance seems physically painful. Sitting on the couch in their modern apartment surrounded by walls of books and a large television screen (which in the course of the film has projected both the footage from the mysterious videotapes and contemporary live news footage), Georges finally 'confesses' as follows:

Ses parents travaillaient chez nous. Papa les aimait bien, ça devait être de bons ouvriers. En octobre 61 le FLN a appelé les Algériens à manifester. Ils sont allés à Paris. 17 octobre 1961, je te fais pas un dessin. Papon. Le massacre policier. Ils ont noyé à peu près 200 Arabes dans la Seine. Il semble que les parents de Majid étaient de ceux-là. En tout cas, ils ne sont jamais revenus. Papa est allé à Paris pour se renseigner. Ils lui ont dit qu'il devrait être bien content d'être débarrassé de ces bougnoules.

The few sentences or fragments recounting the massacre in this tense scene come in the form of a false negation, an apophasis that, to my mind, illuminates the very contingencies of collective knowledge that compromise the possibility of allegory in Haneke's film. Georges seems to

justify the brevity of his account with the phrase, ‘Je te fais pas un dessin,’ literally, ‘I won’t draw you a picture.’ As critics have noted, this phrase indexes the visual narrative of trauma captured by the drawings accompanying the videotapes, but it also points to the cleavage between the visual and the verbal.³⁶ For while he may not draw a picture, Georges does, in an English-language version of the idiom, ‘spell out’ what happened, even if he does so in the most minimal of terms. He does not go out of his way to recount the details of October 17, 1961, but he also does not allow the date to speak, as it were, for itself. However offensive the paucity of this description may be, I would argue that if there were a reliable collective knowledge about this moment in Franco-Algerian history, the sentence ‘17 octobre 1961, je te fais pas un dessin’ would be enough. This is a historical moment that – however problematically – is most often indexed by the date of October 17, 1961, and the ‘competent reader’ would fill in the rest of the details: Papon, the police massacre, the drowning of 200 Arabs in the Seine, and many more facts, figures, and horrors – some accurate, some not – left out of Georges’s strangled utterance.³⁷ But, while Georges’s confession blatantly rejects the impetus to revisit and expose the injustice of October 17, 1961, it also makes clear that the mention of the date alone is not enough, and certainly that it could not have been left out altogether – that is, evoked

³⁶ For an analysis of the importance of the drawings in *Caché*, see Guy Austin, ‘Drawing Trauma: Visual Testimony in *Caché* and *J’ai 8 ans*’, *Screen*, 48 (2007), 529–36.

³⁷ I agree with Mireille Rosello’s assertion that Georges’s account in this scene posits a relatively progressive version of the events of October 17, 1961, a version that, importantly, goes unchallenged in the film (p. 122). But it is the *existence* of Georges’s account that interests me here and that, to my mind, exposes the absence of a competent allegorical reader.

allegorically. It is this failure that points to the unique juncture between history and art, between social thought and representation, where allegory sits.

The uncertainty surrounding the need for these terribly few additional fragments that follow the reference to the date is both extradiegetic and intradiegetic. Georges does, it seems, need to draw a reluctant picture – but for whom? For his wife? For Haneke’s French or French-speaking audiences? For international ones outside of the French-speaking world? Anne’s face remains hidden in this part of the scene, and is otherwise fixed in a state of wide-eyed disbelief and personal outrage. The massacre does not appear to be a subject that has already come up in this globally conscious intellectual household, and Anne gives no indication to confirm (or deny) her knowledge of the event (like Haneke, she is perhaps impatient to move away from historical specificity to the more ‘interesting’ point of Georges’s personal guilt and dishonesty). If the couple had discussed it, would it have been something that came up by chance? Perhaps something featured on their ever-illuminated but generally ignored television screen, or included in their teenage son’s history lessons at school? Perhaps they would have read a relevant headline or an article in the newspaper at the time of one of the commemorative events in Paris and chosen to bring attention to it together?³⁸

There is a curious scene earlier in the film of a dinner hosted by Anne and Georges that introduces us to some of their friends, establishing their milieu and lacing the dialogue with the jitteriness of the couple’s recent experiences of ‘terrorism’ and the layers of secrecy that have

³⁸ The film takes place in 2004, three years after fortieth anniversary of the event. On the inclusion of October 17, 1961, in the French school curriculum, see Katelyn E. Knox, ‘Remapping Postmemory, Sampling the Archive: Reimagining 17 October 1961’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 22 (2014), 381–97; and Gaïti.

wound their way through their lives as a result. Early in the scene one of the guests (played by Denis Podalydès) tells a spooky ‘gotcha’ story about past lives and reincarnation that is certainly meant to mirror and intensify the audience’s suspense and to play further on the duplicity of storytelling. But the story also serves to provide a small but significant detail about the speaker: that he was born after 1961. The dinner conversation thus prompts us to see this group of six people as a multigenerational one, with October 17, 1961, as the bar of reference. Georges and Anne are posited on either side of a divide: those who could have seen or heard something directly about the event, and those who would have had to be told. Representation, the weapon mobilized by Georges’s alleged terrorist, is what separates one generation from the other.

The dialogue between Georges and Anne in the ‘confession’ scene suggests, in other words, that a Parisian book editor married to a television host whose life intersected with those of victims of the police massacre would not be expected to know enough about what happened on October 17, 1961, for the date to speak for itself; or rather, that she represents a set of memories, thoughts, and pieces of information that do not necessarily include a representation of the truncated details supplied by Georges. Unlikely as it may seem, it is possible that Anne learned of the event once and forgot, or learned of it and vaguely remembers, or learned of it and has given it a great deal of thought but never or rarely discussed it with her husband. And that uncertainty is enough to generate those few additional strangled sentences that follow the phrase, ‘Je te fais pas un dessin.’ Inasmuch as Anne functions as an embedded spectator for Georges’s confession here, the scene points also, of course, to the widely varied generations, geographies, and personal and national histories represented by the film’s audience. Haneke could not be certain that enough of his viewers would know (enough) about October 17, 1961, that the halting, peremptory description offered by Georges could be left out without compromising the allegorical scope of his film. The details per se may not have been important to Haneke’s film,

but there had to be enough details provided for the allegory to work. However clumsy (childlike) and inadequate the rendering, *Caché* has to draw us a picture.

How many people know about October 17, 1961? Not enough, goes the predominant ethically-minded response. Along these lines, it is problematic that Haneke's film does so glaringly little to improve this figure, and that for Haneke, in Gilroy's words, 'form and phenomenology are more significant than fidelity to the broken world'.³⁹ And yet I have tried to point here to the ways in which the prioritization of form comes up against the very real contingencies of that broken world. The failure of allegory in Haneke's film – the impossibility of an exclusively implicit narration of the event – is in the end the incriminating sign of the absence of collective epistemology that the film seems to exacerbate with its dismissive reference to the event. In the case of October 17, 1961, we do not have the luxury of form: the eloquent ellipsis of allegory that might circumvent a fetishized apprehension of history, that might make room for the inexpressibility of its traumatic stories, that might offer a way of saying the unspeakable, is short-circuited by the absence of collective memory. Where history brushes up against figurative representation, allegory makes visible those events that have attained a level of tacit awareness, drawing the boundary between histories and stories that can go unnamed and those that cannot.⁴⁰ Narrative cinema may have a unique potential to rehabilitate historical

³⁹ Gilroy, 'Shooting Crabs in a Barrel', p. 234.

⁴⁰ As one of many contrasts, we might think of the Dreyfus Affair, which, as Susan Suleiman illustrates, needed no parsing for multiple generations of readers and thus offered fertile ground for allegorical representation ('The Literary Significance of the Dreyfus Affair', *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth, and Justice*, ed. by Norman L. Kleeblatt (Berkeley: University of California

trauma through the use of allegory, but it cannot do so in the face of events whose archival trace is indeterminate.

Haneke's comments and his film's composition suggest that he does not join the battle to disseminate awareness about the brutality of police forces in Paris on October 17, 1961, and for this alone he might be held as blameless as a great number of artists who have not taken on this particular pedagogical project. What's more, *Caché*'s international success and the significant critical attention garnered by the film have gone a long way towards exposing the contingencies of collective knowledge and concealment in postcolonial Europe. But Haneke chose to use the historical event of October 17, 1961, rather than any other one. And in the 'using' of the event, in mobilizing the narrative work performed by the convenient leap from the particular to the universal, Haneke overlooks – or denies – the prematurity of that formal gesture, turning away from the problem of an archival gap that cannot be filled by a conversation between two people. It is for this reason above all that Georges's confession scene disrupts the otherwise smooth machinery of the film: the character's apophasis ('I don't need to say what I am about to tell you') signals a denial not of the fact of October 17, 1961, but of the absence of that event's narrative in contemporary social and political discourse. Haneke could be said to be guilty, in this respect, of a *formal* breach: of putting forth the conceit that allegory is available to him when in the case of October 17, 1961, it is not. It is perhaps in this failure to conceal its own narrative devices, then, that *Caché* tells its most chilling story: that of a collective epistemology that continues to hover in a state of anguished indeterminacy.

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Press, 1987), pp. 117–39 (pp. 126–31)). I am grateful to Larry Kritzman for suggesting this apt analogy.

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