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# ***Michael Haneke's 'Caché (Hidden)' and Wolfgang Iser's 'Blank'***

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ABSTRACT. This paper considers Austrian director Michael Haneke's 2004 film *Caché (Hidden)* within the remit of Wolfgang Iser's notion of the 'constitutive blank'. Haneke's film exploits the well-known film device of the ellipsis, but goes much further in that the use of the blank is structural. Not only does that which is 'hidden' taint human relations throughout the film, but *Caché*, in its radical indeterminacy, illuminates Iser's contention that it is through blanks that negations gain their productive force, such that negativity is transformed into an enabling structure. A secondary theme will be to consider Haneke's particular use of the blank in Cavellian terms, as a 'staged' withdrawal of *acknowledgment*. Here, Cavell's mechanism of empathic projection is 'staged': a laying bare made apparent through Haneke's foregrounding of the conditions of the film's existence (its conditions of access). We are again and again forced to question the 'staging' of scenes in relation to a fixed camera position, where an uncertainty persists as to whether this apparatus is, or is not, internal to the film's diegesis.

## **I.**

In this short paper, I will attempt three things: (i) I consider Austrian director Michael Haneke's 2004 film *Caché (Hidden)* through the remit of Wolfgang Iser's notion of the 'blank', claiming the film to be a cinematic exemplar of Iser's literary theory of aesthetics response; (ii) I characterise Haneke's particular use of the blank in Cavellian terms, as a 'staged' withdrawal of *acknowledgment* (a withdrawal of acknowledgment that operates at both a personal *and* broader political level); (iii) I claim that Haneke's particular 'staging' of the withdrawal of acknowledgment is structural, in that it reveals the underlying mechanism at play - that is, the empathic

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projective mechanism central to Cavell's notion of acknowledgement. The film self-consciously employs a series of reflexive devices whereby the viewer's position is itself problematised, such that we are uncomfortably forced to confront our culpability with regard to the events that unfold - a culpability tainted by a collective failure to acknowledge an historic event that lies at the heart of the film.

## 2.

To set a context for the discussion (and to remind those who have seen the film of the sequence of events), let me summarise Haneke's plot.

The film opens with a sustained establishing shot of the outside of a Parisian house, a static image over which the opening credits run. After some time, we hear a man and woman's voices, seemingly disconnected from the imagery we are seeing. These turn out to be the voices of the house owners, a comfortable bourgeois couple Georges and Anne (played by Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche). The opening shot briefly switches to Georges and Anne leaving the house, Georges looking towards the viewpoint from where the scene we have been watching was taken from. Then the film suddenly fast-forwards, and it is revealed that we have in fact been watching a surveillance video tape, anonymously left at the house. The footage is thus internal to the film's diegesis.

Subsequent scenes introduce the couples' twelve year old son, Pierrot, and reveal something of Georges's working life as a television host of a literary show. In a second reflexive gesture, that also hints at the constructed status of the film we are watching, the participants of the televised discussion Georges is hosting are told to stay seated while the credits roll. Still at work, Georges is then phoned by Anne, who tells him that they have received another tape, filmed from the same viewpoint but at night. More alarmingly, the video cassette is wrapped in a child-like drawing of a boy's face, blood streaming from the mouth. As the couple play the video, we see a fleeting image of a boy bleeding from his mouth, a flashback of Georges's made evident when we hear Anne asking: 'What's wrong, Georges?' Concerned, the couple now contact the police, who refuse to act as the tapes are adjudged to contain no specific threat. On leaving the police station, our initial empathy with Georges is first tested as he aggressively confronts

a young black cyclist who nearly crashes into him.

After being picked up from school, Pierrot reveals to Georges that he has also received a postcard of the same child-like drawing, and this prompts another brief flashback to a coughing boy, bleeding from the mouth. It is already clear that, as the film's title makes suggest, something significant is being 'hidden' here. Later, at a dinner party with friends, the door bell is rung; Georges goes downstairs to open the door, but no-one is there. He shouts angrily into the now empty street. Another tape, however, lies on the floor. This cassette is also wrapped in a crude drawing, this time of a rooster with its neck cut. When Georges returns to the dinner party he conceals the incident. But after nervously asking why he had been so long, Anne reveals to the guests that they have been receiving these threatening parcels. Georges, angry at Anne's disclosure, responds by playing the tape to the gathered guests, which shows a rainy car journey that culminates at what Georges reveals to be his childhood home, a large country mansion.

The next scene shows Georges visiting his frail and elderly mother, where we first learn something of the significance of the drawings. After sleeping over, he tells her that during the night he dreamed about Majid, an orphaned son of Algerian farmhands. We learn that Majid was adopted by Georges's parents, but then obliged to return to the orphanage. George's mother is reluctant to discuss what she clearly regards as an unhappy memory. A scene of Anne talking to Georges on the phone from a bar is then cut abruptly to a violent sequence of dream images: a rooster having its head cut off; Majid's blood splattered face; a long shot revealing Majid with an axe; Georges's frightened face; the image of the headless rooster running around; finally, Majid approaching Georges with an axe. This cuts to a black screen, then to Georges, in bed, turning on the light, breathing heavily.

An ensuing scene filmed through a windscreen of a moving car culminates at the door of a bleak housing block, then reveals its status as another tape when it rewinds, again questioning what is, and is not, internal to the film's diegesis. In a heated argument with Anne after watching this latest tape, Georges reveals that he thinks he knows who has been sending the cassettes, but refuses to let her know whom this is. In a key exchange that explicitly engages issues of the ability to see things, or not, from the

other's point of view, Anne states: 'I have to trust you? Why not the other way around for once? How about you trust me? Who refused to give trust here? Imagine the shoe's on the other foot. Imagine, I say ...' To which Georges patronisingly replies 'if you could hear yourself'.

Georges then retraces the car journey, which leads him to the run-down apartment of the adult Majid (played by Maurice Benichou). At first Georges fails to recognise him, but allowed to enter the squalid flat he aggressively confronts Majid, asking: 'What do you want from me? Do you want money?' 'What then?'. Majid looks genuinely confused, simply asking Georges how he found him. Visibly upset when shown the drawing of the boy with a bleeding mouth, Majid goes on to deny any knowledge of the tapes as Georges continues to act as the aggressor.

The following day, we once more are watching a scene which transpires to be yet another tape, sent to Anne and (it later emerges) to Georges's boss. This is from a static camera in Majid's apartment, and shows Georges leaving, and then a distraught Majid, sat slumped on a chair, crying (a scene, Anne tells Georges, that goes on for an hour). Georges, who clearly has divulged nothing more to his wife, once again denies responsibility, or any kind of acknowledgment of Majid's position. Confronted by Anne, he finally tells the story of Majid, and how he was orphaned in the massacre of 200 Algerian protesters in Paris on October 17, 1961. When his parents failed to return from this protest, they were presumed to be among those drowned by being herded into the River Seine. Georges tells Anne that as a jealous six year old, his position within the family was threatened by this outsider who his parents planned to adopt, because 'they felt responsible in some way'. Unlike Georges, Majid even 'had his own room'. Reluctantly, after Anne's questioning as to what took place, and disbelief when he states 'I can't remember', Georges confides that Majid was sick, and was taken away to a hospital or 'somewhere', and that he was glad that he was gone. 'What should I call it? A tragedy? Maybe it was a tragedy? I don't know. I don't feel responsible for it. Why should I?'

A further development brings matters to a head. It appears that Pierrot, the disaffected son, has disappeared. Anne and Georges go to the police, and George accompanies the Police to Majid's apartment, where a young man opens the door who turns out to be Majid's son (played by Walid Akfir). Both Majid and his son are arrested, carted off in the back of

a police van with George riding in the front. Pierrot, however, reappears at the family house, having stayed over at a friend's house without the friend's mother's knowledge. When confronted by Anne alone, Pierrot adds another level of complexity when he accuses her of having an affair with a close family friend (which she denies). It seems there are, perhaps, other family secrets undisclosed.

Georges then receives an afternoon phone call at work from Majid, requesting him to come to his apartment. On arrival, Majid explains that he wanted Georges to be present, and then - in arguably one of the most shocking scenes in cinema - proceeds to slash his own throat with a knife he takes from his pocket, the blood spurting out onto the wall. Georges just stands there, not responding. Later (it is dark), we see him exiting from a cinema. He arrives home and can hear Anne talking with friends. He creeps upstairs to the bedroom, and phones Anne. When she enters the darkened room, Georges briefly tells her what happened, and asks her to get rid of the friends. When she returns, she is clearly shocked that he appears to have done nothing to help, and didn't even initially go to the police. When Anne again asks what Georges did to Majid, after further prevarication he finally confesses that he told his mother that Majid coughed up blood, and when they didn't believe him that he had tricked Majid by telling him that Georges's father wanted him to kill the rooster, that Majid was covered in blood, and Georges told his parents that Majid did it to scare him. 'Slitting his own throat for that - a hell of a twisted joke, don't you think?'

The next day we see Majid's son approach Georges at his office. When he threatens to make a scene, they speak. 'Is that a threat? I have nothing to hide?' 'Ah, no?' 'Young man, your father's death must have hurt, but I refuse to be incriminated by you. The Police corroborated my statement. It was suicide. So please, get out of my face. I'd advise you to desist from terrorising us with stupid tapes'. 'They were nothing to do with me'. 'Before he died, your father insisted it wasn't him'. 'Believe what you want, I'm not lying'. Georges goes on to once again deny responsibility. 'Do you know what? You're sick. You're as sick as your father. I don't know what dumb obsession he fed you but I can tell you this ... you'll never give me a bad conscience about your father's sad or wrecked life. I'm not to blame. Do you get that?' At which point, Majid's son reveals his reason for com-

ing: 'I wondered how it feels, a man's life on your conscience. That's all. Now I know'.

On arriving home, and taking some pills, Georges goes to sleep, and either dreaming or in flashback, in the film's penultimate scene we see two attendants taking the screaming Majid off to the orphanage. The much discussed final scene, set on the steps to Pierrot's school, utilises a static camera (just like the opening shot), distanced from the action. Almost unnoticed amongst the children and parents' comings and goings (I didn't see it on first viewing), we see Majid's son talking to Pierrot. Is this open-ended scene from the future? Or, even, perhaps from the past?

### 3.

Of course, the film's title already indicates something as unstated, withheld, undisclosed; and this is, indeed, a film unusually punctuated by gaps. Haneke's use of the blank, however, needs to be distinguished from the better known filmic narrative device of the ellipsis: a plot omission, often signalled by a cut or fade. With the ellipsis, we are left to imagine the omitted scene we do not see, often in such a way that this creates uncertainty. However, in conventional cinema this indeterminacy is typically brought to a resolution during the course of the film as the diegesis reasserts itself. *Caché* does the exact opposite.

Haneke's wider body of work certainly exploits the ellipsis. In particular, violent scenes consistently happen, as it were, off stage. But his use of the blank is structural - and not just structural to the narrative. Not only does that which is 'hidden' taint human relations throughout the film, but *Caché*, in its radical indeterminacy (to the very last shot), confirms Iser's contention that it is through blanks that 'negations take on their productive force' (Iser 1978, p. 217). I will attempt to unpick this claim; firstly, by sketching out Iser's position; and secondly, by considering how Haneke's film might be thought of in terms of such negativity, transformed into an enabling structure.

Iser first develops the notion of the blank as part of his phenomenological concept of the implied reader: 'a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him' (Iser 1978, p. 34). Iser's concern is the reciprocity between text and reader, the structure

and its recipient, such that the reading process is a dynamic *interaction* between text and reader (Iser 1978, p. 107). Within this dynamic, Iser conceives the blank as a deliberate suspension of connectivity between text and reader. It is a suspension of connectivity that demands the reader's act of ideation: a radical indeterminacy that functions to connect the communication between text and reader to the communication internal to the text. In Iser's later work *Prospecting* (1989), representation, now conceived as an act of performing, is freed from any association with mimesis, whereby it brings forth 'in the mode of staging something that in itself is not given' (Iser 1989, p. 248). The modernist literary text is thus, for Iser, not only constituted by negation, but can never be identical with 'the real'. Its 'mode of staging' brings forward a virtualisation of communicative relations that draws upon the real, but allows for an extended temporal consideration. In radicalising this intrinsically problematic intermediate realm, Iser reclaims negativity as a source of aesthetic experience. Importantly for our consideration of Haneke's film, Iser here adopts a Husserlian characterising of negation as not only a superimposition, but requiring a *motivation* for such a negation - where new meaning sits above the negated one, in conflict with it. As the prominent Iser scholar Wolfgang Fluck succinctly puts it:

[O]ur acts of imagining do not automatically possess an aesthetic quality. For Iser, such an aesthetic quality is created only when the imagined objects are deformed, negated, or delegitimated in their validity, because such negation also challenges us to imagine that which is negated. It does this in a double sense, for in order to make the negation meaningful we have to mentally construct not only the object or situation itself which appears in negation but also that which it negates. (Fluck 2000, p. 184)

The latter point is crucial, in that representation opens up a liminal space which oscillates between the real and imaginary, as we are forced to confront both that which is said and that which is not said (the situation the text seeks to negate).

**4•**

How does this oscillation play out in the film? We have seen that *Caché* has, at its very core, two closely related ‘unspeakable’ acts, one private (the betrayal of Majid), and one public. Georges’s fictional failure to address his own guilt, through a refusal of acknowledgment of the ‘other’, is mirrored by a real historic event that indirectly leads back to the death camps. While only briefly alluded to, once, by Georges, this event casts its shadow over the entire film. In the film, Georges’s own betrayal, as a six years old, is intricately tied in to the horrific massacre of some 200 Algerian protesters by the Auxiliary Police Force under the command of notorious former Vichy collaborator Maurice Papon (later convicted for his role in the deportation of Jews to the Nazi murder camps). So, here negativity is tethered to a particular historic event, though the wider ramifications of this are played out (as with many of Haneke’s films) within the fictional domestic confines of a particular Bourgeois household. Georges’s own lack of acknowledgment, and continual refusal to accept any responsibility, directly mirrors that of the French State, which even by 1998 had still only officially admitted 48 deaths. Majid’s visceral act forces us to confront the bodily materiality of this historic and distant event. This is all the more shocking in a Haneke film, where extreme violence (as noted) usually happens off camera. Moreover, this in itself is reinforced by the film’s enacting of a real death. In an intriguing chapter on the death of animals in Haneke’s films, Michael Lawrence states that:

[T]he death of the rooster presents a spectacle of real death in the place of any simulation or reconstruction of the events of October 1961. Eisenstein, we recall, used scenes of animal slaughter to confront the spectator with ‘real death’ during his (composite) simulation or reconstruction of real historic events. (Lawrence 2010, p. 74)

Clearly, both of the film’s staged deaths - one fictional, one staged yet real - refer to this other act of extreme violence where the living are herded (like animals) into the river to drown. Georges failure to empathically project means he stops seeing Majid as human, to the extent that he fails to even notify anyone after Majid’s suicide. What does he do instead? He goes to

the cinema, to escape reality: a reality that Haneke's own work pointedly admits in its oscillation between the real and the imaginary.

## 5.

I believe Haneke's use of the blank constitutes a fascinating example of what Stanley Cavell refers to as a 'staged' withdrawal of *acknowledgment*, which Cavell develops in relation to Shakespearian theatre (Cavell 2002). I am not the first to link Haneke to Cavell, and Catherine Wheatley's book on Haneke (2009) also draws heavily on Cavell. She claims that:

Cavell's theory of cinema's appeal can therefore help us to understand the significance of the shift in emphasis from the film-maker to the film spectator. For Cavell and Haneke alike, no longer is the question how the filmic apparatus positions the spectator, or even (as in the writings of Laura Mulvey, for example) how it creates pleasure for the spectator, but how the spectator *chooses to involve themselves* with the cinematic object. (Wheatley 2009, p. 35)

While this undoubtedly true, it is worth stressing that our positioning relative to the apparatus is also consistently brought into play.

For Cavell, 'empathic projection' is inexorably linked to overcoming human finitude: a painful, yet necessary separateness, characterised by a certain opacity to one another. This sense of finitude lies at the heart of Cavell's 'ordinary language' take on the 'skeptical problematic', and particularly that aspect of skepticism associated not with the external world as such, but with our relation to 'others'. Cavell notes

that my taking you for, seeing you as, human depends upon nothing more than my capacity for something like empathic projection, and that if this is true then I must settle on the validity of my projection from within my present condition, from within, so to speak, my confinement from you. For there would be no way for me to step outside my projections. (Cavell [1979] 1999, p. 123)

As an active form of identification with the other, empathic projection attempts to bridge this intrinsic separation. External to the object of knowledge, and locked into a circle of my own experience, I am obliged

to imaginatively project onto the other. This, in turn, implies a duality of perspective distinct to the skepticism of other minds, in that we are necessarily both an outsider (to someone else) *and* an insider (to ourself). This is the intractable problem of knowing and being known. Following Wittgenstein's example, Cavell applies this to the issue of pain:

What I feel, when I feel pain, is pain. So I am putting a restriction on what the Outsider can know. He can know something about another's pain that I cannot know, but not something about mine. He is not really an Outsider to me. If he exists, he is in me. (Cavell [1979] 1999, p. 418)

Cavell argues that the skeptical problematic lies at the heart of certain works of art. While he famously applies this to Hollywood comedies, it is to his writing on theatre that the analogy with Haneke holds. More specifically, Cavell claims that the skeptical problematic is fundamental to the development of Shakespearian tragedy. For Cavell, Shakespeare makes available to us the recognition of a necessary human condition of separateness, intrinsic to our relation to others, such that the limits of our knowledge of others, and their motives, underpins the very notion of tragedy. If, for Cavell, '[t]he conditions of theatre literalize the conditions we exact for existence outside - hiddenness, silence, isolation - hence make that existence plain' (Cavell 2003: 104), then this is also true for Haneke's film, where Georges is forced to live out the consequences of a long buried and hidden shame. Consistent with Cavell's claims as to a re-envisioning of politics through the ordinary, the everyday, the domestic, Georges's guilt infects relations within the very family he holds dearest. But Georges's seeming inability to empathically project not only constructs a tension between what remains hidden or unspoken between the characters within the fictional world of the film, but Haneke creates a tension by just what is revealed, *or not*, to the audience. While we are excluded from their presence as characters in a film, we are also made complicit through a series of extraordinary reflexive devices.

**6.**

I conclude, therefore, by arguing that Haneke's 'staging' of the withdrawal of acknowledgment in *Hidden* is structural, in that it intends to reveal (and complicate) the underlying mechanism at play - that is, the empathic projective mechanism that I have noted is key to Cavell's notion of acknowledgement.<sup>1</sup> As noted earlier, Haneke self-consciously employs a series of reflexive devices whereby the viewer's position is systematically problematised. In her article 'Serious Film: Cavell, Automatism and Michael Haneke's *Caché*' (Trahair 2013), Lisa Trahair has argued that 'in Cavell's ontology, traditional film accommodates the thinking of the world, of the imagination, understanding and even reason, but it is not reflexive' (Trahair 2013, n.p.). Indeed, Cavell states that cinema must acknowledge 'its own limits: in this case, its outsideness to its world, and my absence from it' (Cavell 1979, pp. 146-147). Yet while Haneke operates within a conventional cinematic medium, he problematises the embodied and dispositional orientation of beholders towards the work. *Funny Games* (1997), for instance, breaks the fourth wall with a direct address to the viewer which challenges the viewer's tolerance for watching the pain of others. In *Caché*, the mechanism of empathic projection is itself 'staged': a laying bare made apparent through Haneke's foregrounding of the conditions of the film's existence (its conditions of access). This includes those aspects of the configurational properties of film that conventional movies would have us forget, such as the camera position and the very materiality of the media. Haneke's indeterminacy deliberately sets out to problematise the spectator position, both ontologically (drawing attention to the mechanisms of film) and by evoking our own complicity in the events as they unfold.

The two are linked, in that we are again and again forced to question the 'staging' of scenes in relation to a fixed camera position. We have to ask ourselves, is this staging that of the surveillance tapes integral to the plot (the camera integrated into the logic of the film's diegesis), or of the film we are watching? This starts from the very first scene of the Laurent's house, which it emerges is prerecorded surveillance footage watched by

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar argument in relation to the work of Douglas Gordon, see Michael Fried (2011) and my own article on Fried's theory of beholding video art (Wilder 2012).

Georges and Anne on their living room monitor. And it finishes with the very similar 'staging' of the final scene, where a final ambiguous narrative twist is offered that causes us to question many of our previous assumptions.

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