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SURVEILLANCE AND PERCEPTION
IN WORLD CINEMA

Three Case Studies

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Abstract

This thesis examines the increasing centrality of surveillance devices, themes and concepts from varying social, theoretical and philosophical points of view by analysing and comparing three films. These films examine the already realised possibility of a surveillance society, whose control and reach is exercised through the manipulation of visual culture. By mobilising concepts expounded by Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault and David Rodowick, I unfold a critique of contemporary visual culture, its dominant modes of representation and the construction of self that they serve.

In Chapter One, I discuss the French film, *Caché / Hidden*, (2005), directed by Austrian Michael Haneke, a film which makes definitive statements about surveillance and the psychology of a surveillant society. Surveillance is established as a point of view in this film, taking on the quality of subjectivity. This point of view, in turn, helps reveal the hidden dimension of a conscience within the main character, and also that which, by implication, may be hidden beneath our increasingly digitised visual culture. I uncover a latent pattern of disconnections, guilt and culpability concealed below the surface of similitude that surveillance and its attendant forms and strategies construct and maintain.

Chapter Two treats the American film, *Minority Report* (2002), directed by Steven Spielberg, whose central conceit concerns the possibility of surveilling the future — in other words, watching events in a future time, and first by monitoring, then by taking action, preventing their occurrence before they actually happen. Surveillance as a topic arises from the prophetic dreams of somnambulist savants who are able to predict future crimes by dreaming the future.

Chapter Three looks at the German film, *Das Leben der Anderen / The Lives of Others* (2006), directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, a film which contributes many elements to the discussion of the genre of the “surveillance film.” Surveillance in this case is perpetrated by the Stasi, the government’s secret police force, in 1984, during the Cold War in East Berlin. In contrast to *Caché*, the figure in the film that undergoes the significant transformation is the perpetrator, Stasi operative Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler, who, rather than exposing the lives of others through surveillance, protects and conceals them.

I identify these films as belonging to the surveillance film genre not only because of their classic use of surveillance, but also because they offer a unique model for the examination of certain social conflicts. The genre of the surveillance film postulated in this thesis constitutes an initial attempt to promote discussion about why we have accepted and normalised surveillance technologies in our every day lives.
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Table of Contents

Title Page:                                                                                                                                   i
Abstract:                                                                                                                                     ii
Acknowledgements:                                                                                                                  iii
Table of Contents:                                                                                                                      iv
List of Figures:                                                                                                                            v

Introduction:                                                                                                                                1

Chapter One:  Introduction:  Caché  (Hidden)  and the Desubstantiation Project:  45

Chapter Two:  Minority Report:

Chapter Three:  Das Leben der Anderen / The Lives of Others:
My aim is to examine the topic of surveillance as it occurs in three films set in different cultural domains and epochs. In order of treatment they are: Caché /Hidden (2005), set in contemporary France; Minority Report (2002), which illustrates life in a futuristic America circa 2054; and Das Leben Der Anderen / The Lives of Others (2006), which is located in East Berlin in 1984, during the waning days of the Cold War.

I consider that these films belong to what I call the “surveillance film genre,” that is, a genre in which both the form of the film and its subject are concerned with the manipulation of reality through aspects of (the construction of) visuality. In each case, from this vantage point, to see is to manipulate and control. Furthermore, being surveilled or surveillant, that is, what they have experienced as a result of surveillance is what is worthy of debate in these films.

The topic of surveillance is far too vast to be considered in isolation, and is discussed using critical concepts derived from several academic disciplines. I take the view that surveillance the tropes associated with it must be pursued in areas pertinent to cultural, political, film and media studies where it can be thoroughly debated. Various modes of surveillance that have been portrayed in popular culture usually place certain characters in the position of the voyeur, watcher and eavesdropper. On the whole, such modes are certainly not a new phenomenon. However, within the media texts of film, literature, television and other media, surveillance has become increasingly central — and I argue, for this reason, it should be examined further.
The bulk of the discussion of surveillance has thus far centred on policing, “social sorting,”¹ and ethical questions relating to the collection of personal information, which are all growing areas of research and are most often located within the field of sociology. David Lyon, the author of *Surveillance society: Monitoring everyday life* (2001), and Gary Marx, who wrote “The Surveillance Society: The Threat of 1984-Style Techniques,” *The Futurist: 1985), are two sociologists who have contributed valuable studies on the subject. Both reference Foucault’s work, *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison* (1977), as the cornerstone of their theoretical framework. My thesis also considers these critical views.

I also include here, a discussion of Walter Benjamin’s major essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), as it relates to distance and questions regarding the notion of authenticity in our increasingly digital age. David Rodowick takes Benjamin’s discussion into more contemporary areas in his work, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After New Media,* (2001). I also draw on the concepts of *machinic assemblages* and other ideas stemming from Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze that Rodowick synthesizes and expands upon in his book. The ideas of both Benjamin and Rodowick also help to support the argument I will set forth about the boundaries “blurring,” if not actually disappearing, between what Rodowick refers to as the “audiovisual culture”² and an audiovisual regime, which may divert attention away from identifying the very presence of surveillance.

Hannah Arendt’s theory of action will weave a connecting thread throughout my thesis. I will demonstrate how perception is often achieved only through the type of “action”

¹ See: David Lyon in: *International Criminal Justice Review,* “Surveillance, Security and Social Sorting: Emerging Research Priorities,” Vol. 17, 2007, 161. “The ‘surveillance’ dimensions of (inter)national security arrangements have everything to do with ‘social sorting.’ That is, they are coded to categorize personal data such that people thus classified may be treated differently. . . . Although the category of ‘citizen’ is still used, for example in passports and IDs, this term is both broader and narrower than it at first appears. Even citizens with those ‘awkward’ aspects of identity may find themselves in a separate group from majority citizens. And some forms of identification relate as much to commercial as to conventionally state-generated criteria. Last, the ‘borders’ where they may be checked are digital. Actual checking occurs upstream of physical or territorial borders (in visa offices and consulates) as well as at those sites,” September 1, 2008, <http://icj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/17/3/161>.

² Rodowick states on page 112 in his 1995 essay, “Audiovisual Culture and Interdisciplinary Knowledge” that: “What I call the audiovisual is an important and global aspect of contemporary everyday life which, in developed countries, is being defined as an emergent, technology-driven culture.” *New Literary History,* 26 1.
discussed in her book, *The Human Condition*, (1958). Also vital to this thesis for framing my argument concerning the significant role that ideology plays in relation to surveillance and the audiovisual regime, is Arendt’s study of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (1959).

In Chapter One I examine the French film, *Caché (Hidden)*. Made and set in 2005, this film takes place in the affluent suburbs of Paris, and deals with the effects of anonymous surveillance. The proliferation and digitisation of media is a background presence in this film. A deeper theme is whether or not there is a moral or intellectual “statute of limitations” on culpability and forgiveness. *Caché* considers the choices people make when they think they are being watched, even if the observer is completely unknown. It is in this chapter that I will begin my discussion of alienation, distance, memory and most importantly, surveillance in relation to the conscience.

Chapter Two discusses the American film, *Minority Report* (2002), which is set in the near future in Washington DC, and imagines the ability to observe and control the future by combining human perception with digital software technology. Adding to the notion of surveillance and the conscience, *Minority Report* also presents a post-September 11 debate on free will, shifting levels of determinism, and the freedom to make moral choices. Here the questions are asked: can we know what will happen through the use of surveillance, and will we or should we try to alter the future? This explores an important discussion of the idea of control: is it our place to prevent what we have determined will be future events?

Chapter Three takes the discussion back to an era when surveillance was a daily reality and used without question to establish and maintain the totalitarian regime of East Berlin in the German Democratic Republic of 1984. Set in the waning days of the Cold War, the film *Das Leben der Anderen / The Lives of Others*, (2006) allows an historical treatment of surveillance from the point of view of the observer rather than the observed. It is in this final chapter that I will argue how surveillance can be subverted in order to act as a conduit
for actions and relationships, rather than as the impetus behind the disconnection it seemed to cause in Caché and Minority Report.

This thesis serves as the beginning of a particular discussion of surveillance and subjectivity by investigating what happens as a result of surveillance. Our interest in surveillance arises from our interest in the future: the way we behave and initiate action depends on how we “see the future.” To this extent, my discussion of surveillance is situated within a broader reflection or mode of perception and seeks to investigate how film, as an instrument of this reflection, examines and critiques our visual culture.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Caché \(^3\) (Hidden) and the Desubstantiation Project

Filmed in France, Caché was written and directed by Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke. Given that it was filmed using entirely digital technology, it becomes necessary to look at Caché through the lens of digital culture. The very nature of the way it was filmed, where the distinction between the original and the copy has lost its relevance, I suggest calls for a new and more complete set of tools for dissecting meaning. David Rodowick, who approaches the study of film from a conceptual and philosophical point of view, employs the word “desubstantiation”\(^4\) to describe a form of visual and phenomenological desensitisation brought about by the increasing disappearance of analogue forms of representation. The criterion of resemblance, he argues, is displaced by similitude. Perhaps this is why when watching the movie Caché, we often feel displaced. Something we see, which resembles something we expect or have known before, belongs to “an era of representation” which had previously derived its authority from something prior to it, an original (1995, 116).\(^5\)

According to the French theorist Michel Foucault, when resemblance based on the previous and familiar ordering of signs, or analogue forms of representation is replaced by similitude, the centrality of their designation has been lost. How so? When the authority of the original is lost, so too is the model of authenticity from which rank and order stems (AC:

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4 David N. Rodowick, Reading the Figural or, Philosophy After New Media. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2001. Subsequent referencing will take the form of RF, followed by the page number.

5 David N. Rodowick, “Audiovisual Culture and Interdisciplinary Knowledge,” New Literary History. 26.1 1995, 111-121. Subsequent referencing will take the form of AC, followed by the page number.
116). By “similitude,” I am referring here to the technological transubstantiation of imagery, such as occurs in the case of photography. The French New Wave theorist, Jean Baudrillard, wrote of similitude in relation to photography (as well as other media, including holography) as the means by which we can separate ourselves from reality while still preserving its representation:

Consider the way the camera is used now. Its possibilities are no longer those of the subject who ‘reflects’ the world according to his personal vision; rather, they are the possibilities of the lens, as exploited by the object. The camera is thus a machine that vitiates all will, erases all intentionality and leaves nothing but the pure reflex needed to take pictures. Looking itself disappears without a trace, replaced by a lens now in collusion with the object - and hence with an inversion of vision. (56)⁶

The discussion of representation crosses national, theoretical and epochal boundaries. In 1936 the German philosopher and cultural theorist, Walter Benjamin, wrote about the new era of art and its mechanical reproduction⁷ ushered in by film in much the same vein. For Benjamin, however, that designated centrality and authority of the original was what he called the “aura” of the original, and his discussion was based on the possible effects on history and society as a whole should the importance placed on the aura be willingly let go of, and in turn, be lost completely. It can also be argued that the methods and techniques director Michael Haneke uses for creating what Catherine Wheatley refers to as a “meta-linguistic style”⁸, also work well as representing a current condition of our societal experience; the quotidian ‘mise-en-abime’ of confusion that we are faced with in our own day-to-day reality, through the excess of digital and other media permeating our senses.

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In Reading the Figural (2001), Rodowick synthesizes the post-structuralism of Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault, as he explains that there is a new merging of “audiovisual culture and interdisciplinary knowledge,” placing emphasis on “how a new semiotic environment is being put in place by digital technologies in contrast to previous cultures” (RF: 210). In order to adequately account for the layered motifs in Caché, I utilise Rodowick’s explanation as to how a “cybernetic society of control” can mask its true intentions and eventual outcomes by employing utopian discourse. Rodowick is most convincing when introducing future projects by linking them to a more familiar understanding of the present: “The representational aspects of digital culture, and indeed, every historical epoch may be confined by its own particular audiovisual regime, that is, a configuration of the expressible in relation to the visible as a way of organising knowledge in relation to power” (RF: 254).

Both Benjamin and Rodowick look at some of the complex and contradictory ways in which we are individually and collectively affected by the increasingly technological and mediated restructuring of our contemporary conceptions of time, space and memories. As analogue forms of representation steadily decrease, their replacement is overtaken by the increase of digital representation. This begins my argument for defining a “surveillance film genre” within what has become not only our predominantly audiovisual culture, but more importantly, defining how surveillance is now an integral part of our particular audiovisual regime.

There is a distinct difference in meaning between “culture” and “regime.” Culture in this case speaks of “distinctive customs, achievements, products, outlooks and the way of life of a society or group,” whereas a regime is better described as indicating “a system of rule or government,” and “an institution having widespread influence or prevalence.”

Caché takes us from the analogue regime and progresses us to the digital, bringing us to the very tipping point.

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point of what happens when visual culture and visual regime blend together and become indistinguishable. Video tapes, memories, dreams, television news broadcasts, even a camera man taping an onscreen television talk show within the movie, all flow into play on the same visual plane, cinematically mirroring our real life immersion in the daily media barrage. Ironically, this familiar condition of media “overkill” is played out in several parts of the film and is in part what fosters some sense of audience empathy for the characters.

In this chapter of my thesis, I will explore what happens when that which is embedded in the central location of memory, dreams and most importantly in our conscience, becomes threatened by the introduction of surveillance. In Caché, the reality of what was hidden is revealed, yet rather than being properly recognised, this reality returns to its original hiding place where it will remain hidden and thus unresolved. Thus surveillance forces the way we look at things to become dislodged. I now wish to discuss how the regime of surveillance is linked specifically to the dominance of the digital code.

“A Shift in Aesthetic Function”

The three main characters in the story of Caché are members of the financially comfortable Laurent family. Georges, (Daniel Auteuil) an intellectual celebrity, is the host of a public television talk show that features guests from the European literati, who, gathered at a symbolic round table, exchange witty and cleverly edited theoretical repartee. Georges’ wife, Anne, (Juliette Binoche) is characterised as being somewhat beleaguered. She is a book publisher who works for a company run by their family friend, Pierre (Daniel Duval), who seems happily married to Mathilde (Nathalie Richard). The two couples are friends, and often socialise, although it is Anne who uses Pierre’s shoulder to cry on far more than her husband’s. Pierre’s wife is the ideal, understanding friend and partner. Together, Georges and Anne have a twelve-year-old son named Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky), a name which we later

10 RF: 212.
deduce may have been construed as a pun on the friend’s name of Pierre. Young Pierrot has a personality that shifts between that of a moody prepubescent loner and a little boy who still kisses his parents goodnight before bed.

We come to notice that there is an excessive proliferation of books decorating and almost padding many of the interior shots in this movie, and clearly, there are far too many for even a life-time of reading. Outside, the street where the Laurent family resides is featured in the opening shot and is aptly called, ‘Rue des Iris’, a name that evokes the physiological iris in the eye, the camera iris, and connects to looking, the underlying theme coupled with surveillance in the movie.

![Image of Laurents' home](image)

**Figure 1**

*The opening shot of Caché is a static view of the Laurents' home.*

In the opening scene, film credits are silently typed in white over a long shot of an exterior view of morning in a quiet, leafy neighbourhood located on a well-maintained residential street dotted with tidy flower boxes. We can judge from the neighbourhood’s appearances that the residents of this street have achieved a high level of financial success. The shot is held unnaturally still and for so long that at first, it appears to be a still frame until

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11 All movie still photographs contained in this thesis are courtesy of *Sony Pictures Classics*. All other photographs are referenced separately.
at last we hear some birds chirping and notice leaves rustling in the distance. Somehow experiencing these normal sights and sounds brings to the spectator a feeling of relief.

When the credits are finally completed, they vanish, but the camera remains static and we are allowed only a minimal amount of visual activity onscreen as we watch a bicyclist ride past and a woman leaving her home and getting into one of the parked cars. What are we meant to be waiting for? Our anticipation builds, but there continues to be no resolution, such as having a car explode, and we still feel as though we are waiting for something to happen. According to our cinematic foreknowledge, the inner clock internalised for setting our attention span to read properly the Classic Hollywood narrative, we feel that something should have happened by now to indicate the film’s genre.

While we are still mesmerised and focused on the same scene, our transparent perceptual bubble is burst rather abruptly and an unexpected hermeneutic layer is revealed when an off-screen male voice interjects asking: “Well?” And a woman answers, “Nothing.” The voices seem to be in the same predicament as the audience, wondering why they too are staring at an uneventful scene.

What happens next is indicative of how the entire movie operates. A closer shot immediately brings our gaze to a door, and we watch a man and woman leave yet from the spectator’s perception the shot “feels” unbroken from the almost static opening scene. In this particular shot, however, it is nearly night-time, and the camera unleashes itself from the moorings of the still shot, tracking the man as he crosses the street. He appears to be curiously looking around for something, but when the woman’s voice we had heard previously calls out for him to come back inside, he returns to the door where the woman is waiting and both of them go back inside.

We are returned to the opening shot. Again, no perceptible break is discerned when now minus the credits, we experience the jiggled, white, mediated lines scratching across the scene and screen that signify the fast forwarding of a video tape. This, and the abrupt insertion
of non-diegetic dialogue, is Haneke’s way of informing the audience that we have transcended the place of our spectatorship and have been magically watching along with the Georges and Anne the first of several surveillance video tapes, in which their lives appear to be the object of surveillance.

Through ensuing dialogue between the characters of Georges and Anne (now filmed in a classic conversational diegetic style), we learn that this and subsequent video tapes have been mysteriously filmed from seemingly impossible angles, delivered to their home anonymously, and with no accompanying note of explanation or demands. Through their initial verbal exchange, we are also given a glimpse of an undercurrent of dissatisfaction between the two, perhaps the result of the everyday tension and stresses felt by the career driven upper middle class couple. These are typical of the moments of bracketed “normalcy” that Haneke allows throughout the film.

This way of involuntarily steering our senses from the position of semi-passive viewer to one of becoming an active participant in some intra-diegetic moment is an unsettling experience, one that is quite different from sitting safely and physically distanced from the movie screen, enjoying a story unfold on film. Although the audience eventually comprehends the situation, Haneke pressures the viewer to contemplate the origin of control in the production of the image being both shown to us and viewed by them. In this sense, by continuing to share a mood of seeming “directorial alienation” with his audience, he briefly relinquishes a certain degree of his own directorial control over the film and exposes the artifice.

We can sense that part of Georges’ unsettling discomfort, however, stems from being out of control. Although he is regularly on TV, the medium is under his control, as the show is planned, taped and edited completely by his choice and he is, of course, paid to be in control. The video tapes that arrive at his house do not contain any lurid, incriminating acts that any of the family has committed. Therefore, there is no easy, straight-forward solution to
their dilemma, such as paying off a blackmailer. Instead, the less the tapes reveal, the more the characters reveal themselves, but the parts that they reveal are unexpected, even for them. The lack of control stems from the inability to determine the source of the videotapes or the surveillant behind the camera, leaving Georges and the of the Laurent family rudderless, not only in terms of how to react to such a mysterious situation, but also who to blame.

Haneke’s opening sequence in Caché highlights several important themes for the audience to consider, not the least of which is how short our attention span has become after years of watching television and films. Temporally and visually the first shot is atypically long, as three minutes are taken up by white lettered credits typed one by one across the screen. Another two minutes go by after the credits fade until we finally hear human voices. By the fourth minute, a tension that has been building from our impatience begins to produce potential situations in our imagination that might occur onscreen. Sensing that something was missing, I myself wondered if the visual stillness was an ominous foreshadowing, and began to brace myself for one of the cars parked on the street to explode from a terrorist’s car bomb. An explosion however, is not the surprise that Haneke produces for the audience.

The surveillance camera is already introduced into the film before we are aware of it, but we are not visually informed until after the credits fade from the screen, when we finally learn only by listening to a non-diegetic conversation introduced through voiceover. Through this disconcerting (and sense dislodging) method, we discover that the family’s home has been surreptitiously videotaped by an impossibly (or invisibly) positioned camera across the street. What we, the heretofore uninitiated audience have been watching (along with Georges and Anne) for the first five minutes, is actually a videotape of their home, which has been mysteriously delivered to their doorstep.
Defining surveillance: “Distance is the opposite of closeness.”\textsuperscript{12}

Historically, the first “surveillance” photograph ever taken was in fact produced in 1839 by the French inventor of photography, Louis Daguerre. Shown below is a mid-day street scene of Paris, but the photograph shows very little human activity, because the length of exposure needed in those days “erased” their movements as they were too quick to be recorded. Here we see only one man, shown on the left in an enlarged inset, who had apparently stopped long enough to have his shoes shined and therefore his image recorded. The distance needed to take in the scope of the street is such that it is doubtful anyone would have known that they were being photographed at the time the picture was taken. The physical impossibility of being able to see the camera or the photographer would have to be replaced by prior knowledge given to the subject, because without that knowledge, the photographer is in fact non existent or “invisible” to the subject until they see the image.

\textbf{Figure 2}  

\textsuperscript{12} Walter Benjamin. WMR: 245.
To refer to being “under surveillance” is repetitious, according to the Shorter Oxford’s English Dictionary, as the definition of the word which is French in origin, comes from surveiller; “sur,” meaning over and above, and “veille” meaning: “watch or wakefulness,” which originated previously from the Latin, vigilare; “keep watch” (3126).

Amongst many variations, the form of surveillance that I am looking at in Caché insists that the subject be unaware at the time that they are being watched, and by whom. To go even further in defining surveillance it is helpful to designate what is not surveillance. Even if the subject of another person’s gaze is unaware of being watched — such as the man in the above photo having his shoes shined — this act of one person knowing (the person who is looking), and the other person not knowing, I categorise as a form of voyeurism because there is still a pair of human eyes watching the subject.

Only in the case of surveillance is it completely unnecessary for another human being to be present to watch someone. I consider this to be a principal of mechanical surveillance. Examples of this are innumerable when one considers the proliferation of CCTV13 cameras operating continuously in public and urban spaces worldwide. An unmanned camera recording another person for reasons unknown, where one would reasonably assume that there is no realistic justification for any state, corporate, or even private security cameras to be present, and without that person’s knowledge or consent is the unsettling type of mechanistic surveillance regime that is invisible and yet prescient in Caché.

The central subtext in Caché is how the characters react after they watch the tapes that have been delivered to their home. In fact, the fuel that drives the engine of the film is derived almost entirely from their reactions. In the very beginning of Caché, when Georges and Anne first become aware that they are under some kind of surveillance through the videotape left anonymously at their door, we watch as their perceptions slowly begin to shift. Once the audience is made aware shortly thereafter, we notice our own perceptions shifting as well,

13 “CCTV” stands for Closed Circuit Television (Cameras), usually installed for security surveillance use in public places.
because, as the concept of Bentham’s panopticon\textsuperscript{14} presupposes, the characters and the audience will react in kind to the existence of an invisible surveillance system. We assume, as they assume, that they are possibly under surveillance at all times, and so our reaction as viewers is to become hyperaware of the mise-en-scène in the film as we try to determine the origin (solve the mystery) of the surveillance tapes.

One of the most significant responses by the family to the situation is that rather than drawing closer together in a protective family mode, they begin to experience an increasing distance from each other, and then take steps to exacerbate it. This peculiar reaction of the family distancing themselves from one another is both brilliant and disturbing in its articulation of a disconnection brought on by the knowledge of being under surveillance. I find in this distancing a strong comment on how Haneke views a societal reaction to living under constant surveillance as well. It does not bring us closer together to know that we are being watched: it seems to drive us apart.

Haneke also interpolates real television news images, loudly blaring in the mid-ground, with Georges’ memories, interfacing them intermittently throughout the course of the film’s narrative streams. These function to construct what Walter Benjamin described as a “dialectical image,” in other words, coming to the present through the past. This is again demonstrated when images of urgent political immediacy commingle quite freely with some of the characters that seem to be placed in order to represent the colonial past, present and future of France and the Franco-Algerian population within the film. The character of Majid (Maurice Bénechou), illustrates the lower-class life-style of the now middle-aged children of the original French-Algerian immigrant. A scene containing an angry confrontation between

\textsuperscript{14} Jeremy Bentham. \textit{Panopticon, or the Inspection House, Preface.} Dublin, (1791). In his own words from the preface, Bentham described the Panopticon as “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example.” Bentham designed the Panopticon as a type of prison building in the late eighteenth century. The concept of the design is to allow an observer to observe (\textit{-opticon}) all (\textit{pan-}) prisoners without the prisoners being able to tell if they are being observed or not, thus conveying a: “sentiment of an invisible omniscience.”
Georges and a young French-Algerian bicyclist represents the barely controlled, seething hostility within the black and white population of present-day France. The tenaciously assertive character of Majid’s son (Walid Afkir), symbolizes a problem that will not easily disappear. Each represents recent historical time-frames throughout France’s actual past, present and future, punctuated by additional hints of the outcomes (consequences) of actions taken within these timeframes, featured on the television news clips. This technique also illustrates how we are conditioned to media noise in the background of our own lives, and that we allow it to distance us from what is important in our lives.

Figure 3

Georges and a Franco-Algerian bicyclist have an angry confrontation over right of way on a Parisian street.

In Caché, the annoying background distraction of the television news din is in part what urges us to seek refuge, by separating and delineating the analogous representation from the digital reproduction being used to distance us from what is important in the film. Haneke manages to include his viewers to the point of making them complicit in the transpiring events, in part by including the transmission of images which inform our collective conscience. If this is how the viewer reacts, we can assume that the characters in the movie will feel the same. Or at the very least, in our most basic reaction and understanding, the audience and the characters will begin to wonder whether or not, and from where and when,
they are being watched. It is all a matter of perception, in other words, now that they have it in their minds that there is the possibility of being under surveillance. It becomes a significant distraction in their lives as their perceptual and intellectual boundaries blend between the real — “here is a tape, real proof we are being watched,” and the unreal — “I imagine myself being watched.”

When the real and the unreal cross our perceptual boundaries, the effect can be likened to mixing paint; two colours combine to make a third. The physical introduction of the video tapes arriving, and the perceptual knowledge that a disembodied “Other” is observing them and bearing witness to their lives, combine to create the third reaction of Georges, Anne, and even Pierrot. Now the observed are compelled to look within their own lives, at certain uncomfortable aspects of their existence which up until that point, have been hidden.

**Interiority and Exteriority, “The unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”**¹⁵

Interior and exterior imagery mixing and interchanging throughout the film is another common theme and style of visuality in *Caché*. Haneke’s exclusive use the HDV¹⁶ camera in the filming of *Caché* records and produces all of its images in perfectly reproducible pixels, and seems to bear much of the responsibility for this new, disquieting version of the unknown and potentially terrifying sense of the indiscernible. Here digital technology erases the outlines of difference, so there are no longer the visible folds in our map of indexical signals to alert our senses to differentiations between our visual, temporal and technically mediated planes.

Furthering my argument as to why this film is worth discussing is Haneke’s use of last century’s distanciation techniques, some of which originated in theatre, and are combined here with twenty-first century contemporary digital technology. The HDV version of *Caché*,


¹⁶ “HDV” stands for High Definition Video camera.
meaning the “film” where there is no film present, “the work of art” in this case, has traveled beyond Benjamin’s concept of mechanical reproduction to the point of being virtually and thus infinitely exactly reproducible. The idea of digital reproduction has at times been almost vilified by Baudrillard,\textsuperscript{17} because of his concern over what the loss of the image’s basic referent means to our visual culture, and therefore the impact it may have to our wider, overall cultural experiences. Baudrillard explains:

\begin{quote}
The same can be said about synthesized and digital images, images that are pure creations, with no real reference, and from where the negative itself has disappeared - we are not only talking about the negative of the photograph but about the negative moment at the core of the image, an absence that makes the image vibrate. A digital image is technically perfect. There is no room there for fuzziness, no tremor either, or any space left for chance. Is it still an image then? (2005)
\end{quote}

And yet, the process within the HDV camera is only another light registering medium, albeit photons expressed through pixels rather than chemicals. But it is not the lack of photo-chemistry that disturbs Baudrillard; it is the ease of reproduction, and the potential for infinite reproduction that is difficult to comprehend not only as a mathematical construct, but also because it calls into question the use-value of the image.

Once digital imaging became a technological reality, analogue imaging has been displaced to make way for a shift in aesthetic function. In 2001, Rodowick's theory of desubstantiation regards digital representational forms as being “levelled to the algorithmic manipulations of binary code,” rendering the changing properties of semiotics, wherein “all space becomes an abstract computational space.” He calls this the “insubstantial image” (RF: 255). How can true recognition take place when the image is insubstantial?

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} Jean Baudrillard. “Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality.” Vol. 2, no. 2: (July, 2005). From the original text of a paper given at the “Light Onwords / Light Onwards: Living Literacies Conference.” York University, Toronto, Canada: (Nov. 14-18, 2002).
\end{flushright}
In 1936, Benjamin’s discussion on the “loss of the aura” from mechanical reproduction relates to another version of “value,” and that is the origin and history of a single image, and how the making of many reduces the value of the original. Beyond not only the reproduction of one to many, but the production of many different images, in the case of film for instance, where so much imagery is laid out for the spectator by the film maker, the imagination of the spectator is in many ways simply replaced by the film maker’s vision. Furthermore, the speed in which the imagery passes by leaves little time for any meaningful absorption by the mind or the mind’s eye. Benjamin: “Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before the movie frame he cannot do so.”

Rodowick speaks about digital culture in a similar fashion, “with respect to the digital creation, manipulation and distribution of signs,” he says that representation can no longer be measured using the equivalence of space, because reading and writing have become “graphical, temporal and non-linear” (RF: 254). Sixty-five years before Rodowick, Benjamin was saying much the same thing: “No sooner has the eye grasped a scene than it has already changed, it cannot be arrested” (WMR: 240). When Benjamin quotes the prolific French writer Georges Duhamel18 as saying: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images,” the words convey to us now a familiar angst. Haneke asks us to consider this: if we have grown accustomed to living lives in which time is being falsified, and images are being desubstantiated, what affect is this having on our perception of other events in our lives?

Benjamin’s and Rodowick’s conceptualising of the fast moving stream of images in comparison to the static canvas painting can be linked with ideas in the works of Paul Virilio. A French writer and theorist, Virilio’s anxiety about what appears to be a general “speeding

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18 Georges Duhamel. Scènes de la vie future, Paris: (1930), 52. Duhamel was born in Paris in 1884, and died in 1966. He was the editor of the literary journal, Mercure de France from 1935 to 1938, and also in 1935, was elected into L’Académie française.
up” of society, in part stems from the instantaneity of digital image reproduction and its lack of physicality, thus endowing the image with an ability to leap over temporal and cultural borders without impediment, which is another description of the disturbance Haneke causes in *Caché*.

Virilio writes in his essay, “Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm,” that we are now experiencing what he refers to as a: “fundamental loss of orientation,” whereby:

Cyberspace is a new form of perspective. It does not coincide with the audio-visual perspective which we already know. It is a fully new perspective, free of any previous reference: it is a *tactile perspective*. To see at a distance, to hear at a distance: that was the essence of the audio-visual perspective of old. But to reach at a distance, to feel at a distance, that amounts to shifting the perspective towards a domain it did not yet encompass: that of contact, of contact-at-a-distance: tele-contact. . . . For the first time, history is going to unfold within a one-time-system: global time. Up to now, history has taken place within local times, local frames, regions and nations. . . . If history is so rich, it is because it was local, it was thanks to the existence of spatially bounded times which overrode something that up to now occurred only in astronomy: universal time. But in the very near future, our history will happen in universal time, itself the outcome of instantaneity - and there only. (1995)

It appears that Benjamin from the modern era and the post-modernists Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard all agree that certain technological changes produce an effect on society, and that media technology in particular is capable of erasing the uniqueness and individuality required for making art. Benjamin’s “fast moving images” — typical of the “film montage” technique for moving a story forward by visually skipping sections of events taking place, is what causes this conceptually speeded-up, and thus falsified time.

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Rodowick’s stance from a new media perspective is more concerned with creating concepts that can make intelligible links and relations from the present to the future. Synthesizing Deleuze and Foucault, he observes that “each age articulates perfectly the most cyclical element of its politics” (RF: 25). This is precisely what happens in *Caché*, when Haneke presents us with past and present French and Algerian politics that threaten to unravel the tightly woven lives of the film’s characters. Someone from Georges’ past seems to appear out of nowhere, only because Georges has avoided recognising the existence of this person for so long that his childish method of “ignoring it until it goes away” fails miserably. This works in complete parallel with France’s earlier method of importing cheap labour from French Algiers by the thousands in the 1940’s and 1950’s only to ignore their later progeny and despair that the problems created by the importation of migrant labour would not simply disappear.

Furthermore, there is a concern with distance. Benjamin’s concern also notes that although the arrival of film meant a larger collective audience was able to experience what only a few had before, the problem became that the audience could not engage with the actors in the same way as one can when seeing a live play in the theatre. This concern in Baudrillard and Virilio become concerns of ever greater distance — the digital or cyber distance — further removed than ever from the analogue referent. However, I argue that what Haneke manages to achieve through this combination of elements is to bridge the artistic, technological and theoretical components between *Caché* and our public reception and perception of surveillance. I contend that by spanning the portrayal of surveillance (conceptually) from the public sphere of politics into the private life-worlds of the Laurents, he reinvigorates the topic of surveillance as challenging, thought provoking and worthy of further exploration.
Visual Culture: Our Relationship with Images

In Part III of Benjamin’s essay, he speaks of how and why art — in this case, film as moving pictures — reflects the world’s different technologies, socioeconomic and cultural systems within an historical context:

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. . . The conditions for an analogous insight are more favourable in the present. And if changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura, it is possible to show its social causes. (WMR: 224)

Continuing with Benjamin’s theory, when, in 1936, he was speaking of photography and the advent of film, his references to changes in the medium that include devices such as the cut and use of montage, illustrate that the “decay of the aura” is a process that arguably continues with the arrival of the digital camera replacing the analogue (celluloid) film camera in recent movie making. It is the very use of the digital camera however, that allows Haneke the directorial control and creative freedom to achieve many of the effects of the visual contradictions striated and embedded throughout the film.

Digital visual technology has arrived and flourished without any specific invitation from the audience, and Haneke expresses some of its darker possibilities in Caché. Without the conventional cinematic warnings of typical genre iconography, we are therefore also without foreknowledge, and so we cannot freely give our “consent,” as we become Haneke’s manipulated viewer and unwitting participant in a universe of seamless surveillance. As slippery as the move may seem, the very technology we have unwittingly grown accustomed to throughout contemporary visual culture is used to drive home the points that Haneke is trying to make.

Our attention is drawn by the distraction of a variety of mismatched yet seamlessly embedded images within the film, and from this we develop a sense that from any perspective
the possibility exists that someone or something is constantly watching. If we as spectators sense this, how do the characters themselves react? There is a point in the film when the intensity of Georges’ onscreen physical reactions becomes noticeably paranoid. He appears to have developed a feeling similar to being haunted, but only in the most private and supposedly impenetrable places within his mind, in his memories and dreams. The physicality of his character is foregrounded when the technology is in danger of becoming too seamless, or visually slick. Haneke switches our gaze to the character’s physical reaction, from pictorial digital “flits” (representing memories or dreams) to physical (perspiring, laboured breathing) which I would argue symbolise “analogue” fits. Haneke is using Georges’ body as the physical referent to the real.

Because Haneke’s economical style of shooting makes the real and the unreal look the same, it causes a relief to both the spectator and Georges to be shocked into the present by his intensely vivid nightmares. Indicated by his flushed face, his panting and profuse sweating upon awakening, his subconscious memories cause the same physical reactions present in the “fight-or-flight” mode. Bringing the audience back to a physically oriented reality allows them the hope of reconnecting with a more familiar mode of understanding the narrative.

The narrative labyrinth laid out before us by Haneke in a variety of dead-end pathways, however, does not allow us to arrive at an end because there is no definitive conclusion to the story. This ambiguity is another “clue” that the foregrounded story is not the most significant cog in the machinery of the film. Haneke’s direction of Caché defines and confounds the experience of viewing it because his approach to the audience does not come as an invitation to “solve the mystery,” although we may try to play detective at first by looking for clues to determine the culprit behind the camera. By the end of the film we can however, acknowledge the freedom that we have to look at the film from different, albeit often disconnected angles, just like those at which an unmanned surveillance camera might be placed.
The challenge of locating and defining the attached and the detached amongst the different levels of surveillance in this movie is like trying to establish the definition of what constitutes truth. Examination of some of the ubiquitous and ethereal aspects of surveillance may be difficult, so it is important to determine how the differing levels of surveillance are portrayed in Caché. Also, it does not matter where we situate our perceptions of surveillance, because what is at stake is the common thread running through the different forms of surveillance, and that is the control of others. Whether seen or unseen, control of others means having some form of power over others. Whether that power is real or imagined, like the aura of the original, the perception of its existence is there to be reckoned with.

Watching Caché subtly induces a pervasive phenomenological discomfort that seeps throughout the senses of the viewer, in large part from the equivocacy of the mise-en-scène and the ambiguity about the source of the surveillance. But what exactly is it that causes our discomfort? Haneke creates a situation within the first shot by putting us in the uncomfortable role of hyper-vigilance; the state of being unblinkingly conscious of the camera’s position, forced to inwardly question the potential of differing and shifting perspectives in every visible moment of the movie. Here is the twist; that potential car bomb in the beginning never materializes, and whatever we begin to suspect of a conventional narrative movie never takes place.

“The shock,” says Mattias Frey, in an essay written on Haneke in 2006, “is ontological rather than graphically violent” (32-33). Because Caché is shot in its entirety using the HDV camera, it becomes central to my argument about how feeling the permeation of surveillance is created; not so much “portrayed,” as are other aspects of the film, but how this “feeling” of the location of surveillance can be an interior experience as much as an exterior positioning of it. After further examination of this “ontological shock” in the same

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essay, Frey positions this concept referencing our “new relationships to images.” He paraphrases Rodowick:

Because of the consistency in medium it is always, initially at least, impossible to differentiate between the various perspectival niveaux, whether TV, home video surveillance tape, or Haneke's film Caché itself. Thus, in this film, destabilization of the spectator is in fact created by the consistency of medium and one might venture, the new mode of perception of the viewer in 2005 grown accustomed to a new relationship to the image (Frey, 34).

Touching briefly here on Rodowick’s theory of desubstantiation helps to explain one of the more disturbing yet engrossing aspects of viewing Caché, a negative side-effect of experiencing an absence — not necessarily and not only of the real — but more so, the connective seams between what is supposed to be “real” and the dream, memory and unreal, all of which seem to be undone by the desubstantiation of images.

The “new mode of perception” reaches beyond just a different way of viewing the image however, as the narrative conventions we may have previously absorbed and selectively naturalised into our unconscious for linking typical plot-lines also seem to unnervingly cancel each other out. The standard methods used for deciphering cinematic meanings on the basis of previous experiences do not engage cleanly enough to connect or disconnect our spatial sense of here from there, and so we begin to lose what were once reliable means of arriving at temporal comprehension, or simply discerning “then” from “now.” Put another way, the phenomenon of seamless consistency in digital media causes a dislodging of the senses. Frey continues:

In particular, Rodowick foregrounds the “transformation of the orientation of the eye” (2001) as an important effect of desubstantiation. In other words, in an age when the digital photograph has lost its direct indexicality and has become so easy to manipulate, we have a new relationship to all images. (Frey, 34)
Much of the mystery and intrigue that is sensed throughout the story originated in large part from the vague feeling of instability in Haneke’s technique of shooting the film, and from the apparatus he chooses for filming. The driver behind the visual enigma in *Caché* is the HDV camera, a purely digital tool, and not only because of the certain conflated, indistinguishable look of the images it creates, but also because of the unbreakable connection that digital audiovisual technology now has with contemporary society, and this, I maintain, is a fact that cannot be overstated.

Could this connection be at least in part responsible for the “new relationship to all images” that Rodowick speaks of and that Haneke so artfully employs? Regardless of the answer, it is beyond irony that digital technology is also unarguably behind the virus-like spread of the visual and audio surveillance devices that increasingly permeate our social, political, and economic lives. The way *Caché* is brought to the screen, and therefore to our attention, may be one of the key elements in establishing a visual taxonomy for the surveillance film genre.

In this case, I would say that the invisibility, seamlessness and ubiquity of being observed (and being the observer) throughout this film help not only to create our relationship to the images, but also to classify the film within this genre. If, as some genre theorists believe, genres, like myths, are the means by which a society can work through some of the changes and dilemmas inherent in being a society, then the way that *Caché* portrays the intrusion of anonymous surveillance as a fact of life — albeit a disturbing one — dropped in the lap of the Laurent family, may be signaling a shift in our point of view. How so? By shifting our point of view from one that originated in audiovisual culture, such as simply watching television or enjoying a film, to one that is steadily changing to that of an audiovisual regime, such as

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21 See Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society, a Structural Study of the Western*. Berkley: University of California Press. “[T]he Western, like any myth, stands between individual human consciousness and society. If a myth is popular, it must somehow appeal to or reinforce the individuals who view it by communicating a symbolic meaning to them. This meaning must, in turn, reflect the particular social institutions and attitudes that have created and continue to nourish the myth. Thus, a myth must tell its viewers about themselves and their society.” (1975,2)
being watched on CCTV by state employed observers, within what is becoming a surveillance society.

**Hidden Behind Cinematic Deviations**

The surveillance camera as icon is removed, but the results of the observation remain. There is not a single public or private security or surveillance camera, nor placement of any ultra high-tech spying devices in the entire movie that we are made aware of, which is oddly intriguing. We know there must be a surveillance device somewhere because of the existence of the videotapes in *Caché*, and since the film is set in contemporary urban Paris, the absence of these techno-cultural signifiers in itself is quite striking. Nor are we ever given a scrap of information or explanation as to why or how a camera is filming the Laurent’s house, and it is difficult to make sense of how Georges or we, for that matter, could possibly miss the presence of a real camera located only metres away from where Haneke has placed it, hanging just above Georges’ car. Like an ode to the increasing practice of “photoshopping,” whereby one simply digitally removes or replaces parts of a picture at will, it is as if Haneke digitally erases the existence of the surveillance camera from the movie, yet what he leaves behind are the images it produces. And so, although there is a sense that something is missing, it is disconcertingly difficult to detect what it is, simply by the very fact that it is not there.

So too is the feeling of slight imbalance we experience from the missing narrative filmic clues in the beginning sequence. Absent are the typical cinematic deviations that foreshadow time and place sequences; for example, switching to a grainy resolution in the film stock which is a common and almost classic signaling for the introduction of a surveillance video camera as the point of view. Only through Haneke’s dedicated use of digital cinematography are these visual connections made or not made, in the mise-en-scène, from the past to the present, from real to unreal. Therefore, through this technique, and in what I argue may be a somewhat binary symmetry, the imagery and the way that Haneke
deploys the imagery, illustrate both the societal and sensory side affects of living with our massive, and ever-increasing proliferation of mediated digital images.

Haneke’s treatment of surveillance is unique, and quite outside of the conventional norm of Hollywood’s recent techno-fantasy oriented “action thrillers” based on seemingly predictive surveillance technology. This is because Haneke prefers not to glamorise technology or valorise the spectacle of violence, a technique that the use of surveillance in cinema often seems to fuel, as John. S. Turner II argues:

By converting the technologies and practices of surveillance into highly seductive cinematic images, images that border on fetishisation of such technologies and practices, popular cinema effectively frames an uncritical celebration of panopticism. . . Interestingly, when films use different surveillance technologies as part of the narrative substance of the films diegesis, this usually serves as a prelude to violence. In this manner, a surveilling episode is more often than not framed as a “suspense mechanism” which provides tension. (1998, 96)

Figure 4

Georges Laurent, the television talk-show host is at ease in his role, where he is literally in control as he “calls the shots.” Note the false book props in the background that also echo his home décor.

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In contrast to this convention, surveillance is presented by Haneke as a conceptual process existing within all levels of human perception, including the innermost part of us which may be “hidden” from others but never leaves us — our conscience. In Caché, the invisible surveillance camera, and the anonymously delivered videotapes portraying an innocuous view of the outside (the external), the front of the Laurents’ home, are the mechanical instruments that embody the means to reproduce the “aura of the natural” (meaning the Laurent family) within.

Figure 5

Haneke places the audience as looking over the characters shoulders, as he simultaneously shows the distance between Anne and Georges in his placement of the characters, physically and visually.

By locating the spectators’ point of view behind so many onscreen props and objects, Haneke employs the cinematic technique of “distanciation”\(^{23}\) in the direction and shooting style when filming Caché. This way, Haneke also brings us into the wobbly situation of trying to control physically the rapid shifting of our gaze to align with our attempts to comprehend what is happening. We are placed behind the surveillance camera, the director’s camera, the eyes of Georges, and the furniture. Even the visual glimpses from what we gather might be the characters’ subconscious mind or memory are never resting long enough to create a firm

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\(^{23}\) Paraphrasing Susan Hayward in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts Third Edition*. London, New York: Routledge, 2000. It was Bertolt Brecht who first coined the term “distanciation” (as in distancing) in relation to his own theatre productions in the 1920’s. He based it on the Soviet cinema / school’s principle of alienation. By distancing the audience and “denormalising” theatre, Brecht, and others since him, hoped to influentially politicize the audience into feeling they too could change — by denormalising — society itself as well.
connection, let alone allow a single, definitive narrative trajectory to take hold or lead us to any natural conclusions.

The Broken Hermeneutic Circle: Distanciation, Majid, and the “Long Take”

In his article, “Haneke, the Long Take, Realism,” John David Rhodes quotes André Bazin’s views on what the use of cinematic long takes achieves:

The long take, in André Bazin’s famous terms, performs a variety of labours, among them this one: a forcing of spectators to assume a more active role in interpreting the representation of reality before them. No longer are spectators guided by the close up, the edit, the montage sequence; instead they are “forced to discern . . .” Oddly, this same foisting of an ethical-hermeneutic project squarely onto the shoulders of the viewers which is affected by the long take (and deep focus), also delays the same activity.

Many of the techniques of film distanciation such as non-diegetic inserts, characters speaking off screen and unmatched shots inserted into the mise-en scène, are employed by Haneke to distance the audience. Throughout Caché, however, this distancing is achieved predominantly by his paradoxical urging us to scrutinise his images far more closely than we were expecting to, especially when he brackets the entire film within two long-take shots, one at the beginning and again at the end. We feel that we are meant to discover something pivotal in each of these scenes, only because of the distance and the unusual length of time that the camera, and therefore our gaze are allowed to linger on them. We are the surveillant of each moment and somehow by watching these scenes we conclude that we are meant to gain insight. Is this how we justify surveillance in our everyday lives as well? Haneke asks the question, but does not answer it.


When one of the video tapes shows the camera’s point of view from behind a car windscreen driving in the rain to the family’s estate where Georges grew up and his mother still lives, again we’re not sure if we are watching the movie or a videotape being played within the movie. Nevertheless, this onscreen action carries us forward to the bedside of Georges’ mother who still lives in the family home. This brings us to the film’s introductory discussion of the character Majid\textsuperscript{26} from Georges’ childhood, an Algerian boy not much older than Georges. Originally, Majid was the child of the farm workers employed on the vast estate of Georges’ parents. Georges speaks of dreaming about him to his mother, but she either doesn’t care to remember, or she finds the memory of Majid far less significant than

![Figure 6](image)

The silhouette of Majid as a boy at the door of the barn of Georges’ boyhood home, as seen in Georges’ dreams and memory.

Georges has believed it to be, deep in his heart all these years. Through their somewhat awkward and tentative discussion, in which Georges also reveals himself through simple small talk to be an accomplished liar, we discover that Georges’ parents briefly considered adopting Majid. This act of mercy had been considered after Majid’s parents were killed in

\begin{footnote}{26} The significance of what the name “Majid” translates to in English should be noted. From the African (Algerian), French, Muslim, and Arabic language Majid means: “Another name for the Quran.” \end{footnote}
the infamous Franco-Algerian riots of October 17, the 1961 “Massacre of Paris.” Majid was an orphan, Georges was an only child, and their estate had plenty of room for both boys.

During the night of his visit to his mother, Georges has a nightmare that explains much of what may have happened, albeit still rather obscurely and opaquely. The nightmare is at least “the truth” as seen from Georges Laurent’s sublimated point of view. The HDV camera combined with the filming technique again takes us to the curious world of being visually destabilised, because even if we know it is a dream, we cannot be sure whose dream this is, or who is behind the surveilling eyes, watching the dream unfold. We see that Majid has been kept at a great distance from Georges’ consciousness, but as the film progresses we see that the boy is, however, quite embedded in what we take to be the area of Georges’ conscience.

In addition to these unclear starts, stops, and visual interjections, it is never revealed who is filming or who is sending the video tapes. Instead, secret events that refuse to remain hidden are revealed no matter how “innocent” the characters have convinced themselves these secrets are. In fact, to people outside the main characters of Georges and Anne (the audience, for instance, Georges’ boss, Majid, Majid’s son, Pierrot: even Georges’ mother seems to know something is not quite right), the secrets reveal themselves quite easily, and to the outsiders, they are anything but innocent. It is as if the introduction of the images in the videotapes sets off the reaction of revealing something that is submerged beneath the surface of each character’s persona.

27 See Charles Masters, *Sunday Times*: October 12, 1997. “In 1961, during the Algerian war of independence, Maurice Papon, then chief of police, imposed a curfew in the capital after the murder of 11 of his officers by nationalists. The Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), which had orchestrated the attacks, responded by organising a protest march. Up to 40,000 Algerians answered the call to demonstrate on the night of October 17. What happened next has never been established precisely. The official version was that three people died in clashes between police and demonstrators. At a cabinet meeting afterwards, President Charles de Gaulle described the deaths as a matter of “secondary” concern, by comparison with a resolution of the Algerian crisis. The reality, according to Constantin Melnik, an adviser on police matters to the then prime minister Michel Debre, was that at least 200 - and probably closer to 300 - people were slaughtered by Papon’s police, who were intent on avenging the deaths of their colleagues. His claim is supported by demonstrators, observers and police officers.” Sept. 3, 2007, *Flame*: <http://www.fantompowa.net/Flame/algerians_sunday_times.htm>.
A short summary addressing the larger question surrounding the current concept of the conflation, proliferation and assembling of digital imagery helps to explain why so many scenes in Caché contain varied modes of digital representation. Caché brings the foregrounded and back-grounded together, by mixing and infusing the diegetic with the extra-diegetic, and in short, by using counter-cinematic techniques. Catherine Wheatley theorises this as Haneke’s narrative device in Sight & Sound:

Hidden sees Haneke’s first use of high definition video cameras which allow him to set up a narrative device that will mix the images from the videotapes with the images of ‘Georges life’. In this way, the director formally achieves the maturity of a meta-linguistic style . . . the image itself a central character of his movies. (2005, 35)

Wheatley’s comments on Haneke’s image mixing and his “meta linguistic style” are relevant to the way Caché must be approached theoretically as well. Definitions of digital visual aesthetics are evolving, thanks to the seemingly unavoidable take up of digital technology, which is itself evolving (or “morphing”) even more rapidly. Also undeniable, is the influence that digital technology has on almost every other aspect of contemporary civilisation, especially popular culture entertainment media. And even though Haneke disapproves of over-indulgence in popular culture media, he is not immune. This influence ironically flows over, as Caché might be found under a sub-heading of: “Digitally shot movies presented for consideration to the jury at the Cannes film festival.”

There is almost no other choice then, but to use a “meta-theoretical” approach to critique Caché. Compared to traditional filmmaking, the technological capabilities housed within the HDV camera mean that digitally shot scenes can be created, deleted and re-shot in a fraction of the time and cost for cinematic distribution. A multiplicity of discrete image streams taken up by the camera will reappear as a visually seamless construction, or even disappear through techno-visual manipulation. The seamless deconstruction of imagery is also possible in this fairly simple process. Haneke or any cinematic director who wishes to
engage in deconstructing, resequencing, or reconstructing any part of the movie is now free for creatively portraying more complex concepts. The transformation of time/space, self/other, body/mind and a host of other philosophical and theoretical dualities\textsuperscript{28} are made possible by the visually fluid nature of digital cinematography, because there are no physical cuts or splices on any film material. Every image the camera takes in is reduced to pixilated information, virtually stored, and can therefore be easily accessed and perfectly copied. The significance of an aesthetic function with unbroken sameness is what Mattias Frey refers to previously in this chapter, when he spoke of the theory outlined by Rodowick. Synthesizing concepts from Deleuze, Foucault, and William Mitchell,\textsuperscript{29} Rodowick frames a discursive “theory of desubstantiation,” which applies directly to the current way our readings of representation are devolving; when he compares these changes to those in other periods of socio-cultural and technological change. Discourse has moved from a “linguistic activity” to a “multimedia activity,” pushed on by the “digital revolution:”

Forms of expression and reading, can no longer be considered as simply spatial or temporal, or distinguished by simultaneity and succession. Rather, digital culture presents us with mixed, layered, and heterogeneous audiovisual images unfolding in nonlinear space and time. . . . Compared to the analogical arts — which are always instantiated in a fixed, Euclidian space — the digital arts seem abstract, ephemeral, and without substance. Digital representation is defined as “virtual” owing to its desubstantiation: the disappearance of a visible and tactile support for both image and text. (RF: 212)

Rodowick’s concept of desubstantiation helps to explain the feeling of displacement when viewing \textit{Caché}, within the realm of what he is calling “digital culture,” it is as if a virtual “fourth wall” has been penetrated, thus paralleling the absence of any closure mechanism in a binary coded data file — digital imagery — leaving a medium with an open

\textsuperscript{28} Anne Everett and John Caldwell take up this issue and refer to it as “digitextual deconstruction” in their collaboratively written introduction and throughout several author’s essays in \textit{New Media, Theories and Practices of Digitextuality}. “Introduction,” Lon., NY: Routledge, 2003, xii.

\textsuperscript{29} These three are highlighted in RF in the chapter, “An Uncertain Utopia — Digital Culture.” Rodowick refers to a wide range of other theorists and philosophers extensively throughout the rest of this book as well.
ended invitation for modification and endless reproduction. The positive side for filmmakers is that present day technology can portray the virtually imagined worlds of dreams, memories, time, and personal perceptions, for instance, the point of view from the eye of a beholder, much less clumsily. The type of computer generated imagery (CGI) that digital technology is capable of producing may enable filmmakers’ to create entirely different metaphoric representations and visual signifiers.

There is of course, a negative side to this imaging technology. This may be demonstrated by the ease with which the viewing aspect of the surveillant is often portrayed in entertainment media. Creatively brilliant and very “real” looking but simulated fantasy models of devices and situations surrounding surveillance technology may create a banality in our perceptions, and an unquestioning acceptance of today’s real but less exciting-looking versions of surveillance devices and situations (cameras put in place with alleged promises of security), to the point that they are subsumed and normalised in our culture. In other words, a digital regime of surveillance predicated on the assurance of safety is the very world we are entering today and one which will intensify in surveillance more so in the foreseeable future.

One may wonder how strong the framework can be when Wheatley’s description of constructing the “twin pillars” of the narrative and the structure points to a process of “simulation and dissimulation.” Perhaps this is why Rodowick’s theory of desubstantiation seems to work well when attempting to explain the varied effects of the virtually represented commonalities in our lives. As Wheatley describes this effect in Cachê:

In Hidden, centred on the epistemological conundrum of who is persecuting whom and why, the fast forward functions as a warning to the spectator not to get too involved in what they see on screen, to be distrustful or at least sceptical. For it is introducing a film in which simulation and dissimulation form the twin pillars not just of the narrative but of the structure. (2005, 32)
As we watch, we feel some hope that we will get to the bottom of solving some of the mysteries in *Caché*, because there is something oddly familiar in doing that much, as we attempt to maintain our loyalty (or inadvertent, naturalised subservience) to the Classic Hollywood narrative. We become a perceptively discombobulated spectator because we are placed at a distance and yet we also become transformed into participants, still carried along, no longer by a classical narrative structure, but by the storyline and an old fashioned need to reattach ourselves to an outcome. The problem is that once the promise of the “hermeneutic circle” is broken in the opening scene, Haneke does not provide us with the expected threads of coherent textual content to close that circle again. The solution may be to locate the hidden threads, and then proceed to weave the narratives that make sense to us.

**Revealing the Hidden, Hiding the Revealed**

From the very beginning of the movie we observe (ironically) the effect that being under anonymous surveillance has on the family. Coinciding with each mysterious arrival of another videotape, Georges, Anne and Pierrot become increasingly agitated and unnerved. This could be seen as an odd reaction because Georges is, after all, an erudite television talk-show host on a show that features writers, theorists and other literati, and he is quite comfortable being video taped. However, because of the unknown origin of the surveillance tapes, the family has lost its sense of orientation, and so their fear and anxiety turns inward, where they take aim at each other.

For the most part the tapes do nothing more than provide commonplace images such as driving sequences from the camera’s fixed point of view inside the car or the outside of their family home, and Georges’ childhood home. Yet even though there is nothing shown on the tapes that could possibly be construed as threatening, the private and specific but entirely mundane information about the life of Georges Laurent, and by proxy his family, is still
considered to be highly privileged information. The more banal the information is on the tapes, however, the more the family feel compelled to reveal unsavoury portions of their lives.

Interestingly, when one of the tapes showing a drive into one of Paris’ seedier suburbs is played, Georges seems instinctively to ascertain the location although he has never been there. He has a hunch (that he does not share with Anne) that this is the home of Majid, now a grown up man who, as we learn much later, is someone Georges betrayed in their mutual childhood. When the videotapes begin to include Majid, again filmed from an impossible angle within his apartment, it would be easier on the audience if we, along with Georges, could attribute all of these tapes to a vengeful Majid. Perhaps then we could get on with experiencing the kind of narrative sequence we are trained to read, but this is not the case, this is not how director Haneke operates. Tapes featuring Majid arrive at the Laurents’ house, and no longer portraying the mundane, display intense emotions and finally, shocking violence. Rather than react in a way that we might expect, such as revealing his own emotions, Georges seems to retreat into hiding.

![Figure 7](image)

*Majid experiences what he assumes is a completely private and intensely emotional moment in his own shabby apartment, but instead he becomes another character in the mysterious videotapes sent to the Laurent’s upscale home. The audience along with George has been inside Majid’s apartment moments before this scene was shot, yet there was no evidence of a camera anywhere, let alone from this viewpoint.*

What is I found most revealing and inexplicably unnerving, is being able to hear through the palpable change in Georges’ *voice*, a tone that is instantly recognisable as the
reaction to or experience of guilt, or shock, or at the very least, extreme psychological discomfort. Georges’ face is not onscreen, but you can hear the throat constrict and the mouth go dry, and thus easily imagine the adrenaline rush that is causing restrained panic in his voice.

Haneke briefly inserts the digitally seamless visual (and silent) vignette of a small, frightened boy, bleeding from his mouth, hiding and cowering on a window seat in the dark. Somehow, we can deduce this as a scene which is in fact emanating from the space within Georges’ memory, spliced right into the diegesis of the film. However, it is as though this foreknowledge is phenomenological, signifying a knowledge that is felt, and not placed so much as a visual clue on the map of the narrative. By placing it within the videotape, or in what we think we are watching, which is the night-time surveillance videotape of someone’s home, Haneke reminds us of the intensified reality produced in a nightmare. This is desubstantiation in action; dislodging a familiar analogue referent—a memory, and re-placing it with similitude, the digitally filmed portrayal of a memory within the visual space and temporality of watching a videotape in the present.

Haneke graciously allows us a break from this effect when he shows Georges (who appears as confounded as we are at times) during his visit to his mothers’ house, taking a long look at the day-time “real” version of the window seat in his memory. The seat is actually located in the family living room of his childhood. But before his eyes rest upon the now empty window seat, they stop at a large, worn leather chair, likely to be his father’s chair. Here again are the “brackets” hemming in the reality of a piece of furniture that still exists in the present, but furthermore, we see that Georges is making sure that the father’s chair, which belongs in the living room is still there, and the little boy, who Georges clearly thinks does not belong there, is gone.

Further invading the Laurent family’s lives are drawings of several disturbing images which begin to appear separately, either as the wrapping of a videotape sent to their home, or as postcards appearing in the mail at Pierrot’s school, and even at Georges’ office. One
drawing is of a rooster with a severed head, with bright red blood drawn as if gushing across the page. Is it symbolising the political decapitation of France or is it of personal significance to Georges? Haneke is using the surveillance film genre to enable us to look at it both ways.

Another drawing is of a small boy with blood flowing from his mouth, which I assumed at first was to lead the audience onto the narrative path into assuming a future kidnapping. Then, the most grisly image is one of a boy with his throat slashed, again with blood gushing across the page. All of the pictures are techniques of foreshadowing, but the events they foreshadow are unimaginable at this point in the film. The drawings, sent as anonymously as the videotapes remind us again that someone is watching the family, and even though we still do not know why, the feeling of being threatened looms.

Figure 8

Disturbing drawings on paper begin to appear along with some of the videotapes delivered to the Laurent home, as well as on their own at Pierre’s school and at Georges’ office.

Alienation Effect and the Transformation of Perspective

In one scene midway through the film, Anne arrives home late after a long, tearful and unusually intimate lunch with her boss, Pierre. Georges and Anne suddenly realise that neither of them knows where Pierrot is, and they begin to worry aloud. This is a red herring, however, because Caché is not a film about a kidnapping. Haneke then employs the technique
of drawing the audience into a self-reflexive voyeurism, when in the background, non-stop on-screen footage of violence in the Middle East, or of riots in the streets of France by Middle Eastern people appear in the television news, which is turned up to a noticeably high volume. Here Haneke quickly illustrates how we are often disallowed the time to discern who is Israeli, Palestinian, and so on, almost as if it does not matter. In other words, more information does not always mean better information. By switching our focus back and forth between “real,” news footage and Georges’ and Anne’s growing panic over their missing son, Haneke breaks some of the illusory flow of the narrative and demonstrates another side of the distanciation in the film.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 9**

The interior of the Laurent’s home is presented as an environment of layers, obscuring the windows, which are barred like a prison. The expensive television blaring noisy news footage of seemingly random Middle Eastern violence is ignored by the couple. Books are stacked like protective sandbags in a foxhole.

The news images are played on Georges’ and Anne’s contemporary, expensive flat-screen television, a further signifier of their bourgeois life style. The television screen also appears to be nested in a sort of geometric seamlessness, built on the same plane within the fortress-like wall of books in their living room. Above and behind the bookshelves are barred windows, far too high to be able to see out of. Really, it is like a collage of communication,
television, books, the real world, each being increasingly obscured by the next. Here we are also shown the Laurents’ truly insulated existence away from the outside world of real suffering and victims, which is another one of Haneke’s recurrent themes. The audience cannot help noticing the annoying background din of the television news violence, but it is being completely ignored by the fore-grounded characters of Anne and Georges, typifying what Western society’s world perception through the audiovisual digital culture circa 2005, has become.

Benjamin’s essay mentions the ability to master tasks in “the state of distraction” as proof that being able to do so has become “a matter of habit” (WMR: 251), Rodowick says this is a “transformation of perspective,” indicative of the new relationship between humans and machines, or what Virilio alluded to as “splitting the viewpoint,” by a “sharing of perception” between the human and the “seeing machine.” Haneke himself claims in interviews that his films are used to expose the “coldness” of Western bourgeois society, both caused and represented by the proliferation of violent images through television. I argue that is also reads as the spreading intrusiveness of our audiovisual regime.

Other than the cacophony of the television news, however, Caché is in many ways quite a spare movie, curiously devoid of all music of any kind, and is judiciously edited so that we feel we must pay precise attention to the action or we will lose track. Haneke’s use of the HDV medium and its inherent quality of visual seamlessness throughout the film create an oddly unnerving, rather than soothing consistency in what is visually perceived as sameness. This may be referring to an increasingly common motif reflecting the public’s dichotomous levels of comfort and discomfort regarding our cohabitation with the multitudes of surveillance cameras, many of which are tucked into contemporary urban architecture, so as to become physically invisible or, even where they are obviously present, so normalised in our consciousness, that they have reached the point of being invisible.

Cinematically portrayed modes of surveillance can be seen as representational models of visibility that are capable of making over-arching allusions about where we as human beings feel we can place ourselves within the transitory and increasingly alienating realm of digital culture. The use of alienation\textsuperscript{31} works well for Haneke in \textit{Caché}, because he appears to be urging us to drop our old way of experiencing cinema, and most importantly, of the way we perceive the world. By doing so we can begin to experience what Bertolt Brecht referred to as, “mitdenkend statt mitfühlend,” (“contemplation rather than compassion”) in the theatrical form Brecht called “Das Epische Theater,” (“Epic Theatre”) which are partly from what the Soviet cinema / school of the 1920’s called the “alienation effect.”\textsuperscript{32} We are placed into the position of being unable to remain passive, forced into viewing the film critically and analytically, removing any chance of being mindlessly entertained, but one might also say that Haneke stubbornly refuses to disclose any of the conceits and contrivances necessary to disrupt the illusion.

Here, I disagree. Haneke indeed gives us all the clues we need, as long as we are willing to accept them and their limitations. By digitally flattening the images in many of the films sequences, and by inserting nearly subliminally brief flashes of images into the mise-en-scène, and by using a large number of unusually long, static takes and long shots in his technique, we must learn to see via the flatly continuous visuality within the movie. This curious impression of destabilisation is brought on not only by Haneke’s use of a single type of camera, but also by a meticulous reflection throughout his direction. Haneke even chooses his use of tracking and panning sparingly, because he feels that a tracking camera may create a dynamic of its own that overtakes the character’s intent.

Some of the videotapes in \textit{Caché}, all of which are delivered anonymously, contain images not of the family members themselves, but of other aspects of their lives. For instance,


\textsuperscript{32} German translation: “Verfremdungseffekt” or “V-Effekt.”
the large estate that is Georges’ boyhood home, and where his mother still resides, is naturally a place that is “historical” for him, in that it represents the history of his upbringing, and for us it also informs us of a history of financial comfort for Georges. The drive to this home, which is filmed from behind a rain-spattered (and therefore view-obscuring) windscreen, brings us to a location that is important in Georges’ life but we, the audience, and even Georges are still separated from the actual experience of being there. We see the place but the meaning of the place is lost to us through this videotape, which is another step removed from the real experience of being there. Before Georges returns physically to the estate, the meaning of the place, or as Benjamin puts it, the aura of its “unique existence,” returns to Georges only through his memories and his dreams. Here, through these cognitive events, he makes use of his complete body, because there is no separation between his physical body and the neurological patterning in his brain that recaptures the memories and causes the dreams (and his nightmares) that in turn create his physical reaction of panic.

Within the consciousness of Georges, as Benjamin maintained, the significance of: “its presence in time and space . . . at the place where it happens to be” (WMR: 222), still resides in relation to the reproduced image on the videotape, as an original referent of sorts. However, because of surveillance in its portrayed invisibility, invasiveness and insistence, the permeation of both inward — connected and inseparable — and outward — disconnected and separated — versions of it throughout much of the film, does little to assist us in determining the origins of the surveillance or the reasons why this family is being watched and who, if anyone, is actually engaged in carrying out the surveillance.

Haneke regards filmmaking as being both art and a representation of social concerns:

Commitment is not a service; it is not something one can choose to have. One either is engaged or is not. And if filmmakers are not committed, I don’t think they should be reproached. It’s simply a different way of dealing with the world, to approach their art. I think what is essential to film so that it is taken seriously is that it represent not only social concerns, but also debate its very existence: the medium itself, just as is the case with literature and every other
serious art form. The question is, is film merely entertainment, or is it more? If it is art, it has to be more. Art can be entertaining . . . it is more than diversion, it is concentration, focuses your thoughts.33

Although some may find Haneke’s approach condescending, I argue that he is actually respectful of his audience. We know for instance, that in reality, memories and dreams are not accompanied by harp music and watery, blurry visuals as they have often been signified to us through earlier cinematic conventions, so Haneke, who even mentions in the accompanying DVD to the film that shooting convincing dream sequences is quite difficult, does not belabour us with these tropes. Rather, we work out for ourselves what represents now and what is the past for those onscreen characters.

**Detaching the Pearl**

The common element throughout all of Haneke’s films is his penchant for making the audience uncomfortable by using a variety of cinematic techniques, and one is by causing them to doubt or question the visual veracity of what they are seeing. Social morality on a broad political scale is another theme in Haneke’s films, which he plays out within the microcosm to represent or demonstrate a large, macrocosmic issue. In the case of *Caché*, Haneke seems to be calling up the memory of what has been called “The Paris Massacre,” referring to October 17, 1961. On that evening, it was reported that 30,000 unarmed French Algerian Nationals gathered in a peaceful demonstration to protest against Muslims being targeted for meeting unrealistic curfews. They were met with clubs, batons and general brutality by a force of 20,000 Parisian Police who knew they were unarmed and who took “advantage” of the situation.

It has been estimated that as many as 300 Algerians were left to die, or, already beaten and knocked unconscious, were thrown over bridges and then left to drown in the Seine River.

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33 Michael Haneke in an interview with Karen Badt at the Cannes Film Festival, November 2005.
There was an infamous cover-up and general disavowal or refusal to acknowledge, much less take responsibility for this event until recent years, most likely due to the children of the victims, and their relatives becoming old enough to seek retribution for the situation. Haneke reminds the audience that consequences will result from issues that have been left unresolved, such as the flooding of France with cheap labour from the foreign nationals of colonial Algeria in the 1950’s, and their eventual population of offspring who must be housed, fed and educated. When Georges’ parents attempted to make things right in their own small way within the microcosm of their family by attempting to adopt Majid after his parents were killed, Georges’ lies stopped them from doing so. We see in very small glimpses the differences in outcomes for the two men as a result of what one small lie can do to a man’s entire life. But in the case of surveillance, we also see the power that both the disconnected mechanical version of surveillance can do in reawakening what the original, authentic inner surveillance system recorded long ago in Georges’ conscience, and had kept stored perfectly in his unconscious all those years.

Figure 10

Algerian foreign nationals (AFN) demonstrating in Paris, October 17, 1961, (AP).

Unfortunately, Georges’ way of dealing with his conscience is to continue to deny the reality of what he saw and what he was told. In fact, near the very end, in the penultimate scene, he simply swallows a couple of sleeping pills, closes the curtains to his bedroom, shuts
his eyelids and dreams about Majid as a boy being hauled away screaming to the orphanage, as Georges’ parents retreat into their home. This was the conclusion the boy Georges dreamt of, and the adult Georges carries on dreaming the same dream, except that Majid, who commits a brutal and visceral suicide by cutting his own throat in front of Georges, has been sent much further away than the orphanage this time.

Georges chooses sleep rather than face the consequences of his actions. Of course in Georges’ mind, since the actions were those of a six year old child, he feels no remorse for what he has done, and considers that he has no duty to repair any damage that had occurred as a result. His conscience, it seems, is sufficiently buried under the layers of years that have passed between then and his present. He is more annoyed than anything else when Majid’s son arrives unannounced at his office, and Georges assumes he is there to call him to account for his father. Before Majid’s son can reveal to him what he wishes to speak to him about, Georges angrily tells him: “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?” He then adds, “Do you expect me to apologise?” Georges refuses all culpability for any part his action may have played in Majid’s (and now, his son’s) life, and yet, refusing his part and taking no blame does not release him from his suffering. Never at any time in the movie does Georges seem particularly happy or fulfilled. Because he will not accept blame, or apologise or allow his conscience to be “bad,” he therefore opts out of any chance to seek forgiveness for his deeds.

**Conclusion: The Desubstantiation Project Reveals our Loss.**

One cannot ask forgiveness when no responsibility is admitted for taking an action, and in Georges’ case, as in much of *Caché*, no responsibility can be admitted if one cannot differentiate between what they have done and what they ought not to have done. When the crude, child-like wax- crayon drawings of blood and violence began arriving with the
videotapes, I equated them to the analogue “real” past, meaning the physical marks made on paper material represent a real time and activity in Georges’ history.

What is important is that the aura of authenticity that Benjamin speaks of exists in Georges’ memory which, like a pearl to the two halves of its shell, is also attached to both his consciousness and his conscience. When an unexpected and uninvited memory manages to break the surface of his consciousness, Georges becomes perceptibly alarmed over a clue that he was obviously not expecting, yet it is instantly referential and painfully meaningful for him. Georges recognises the clue but does not recognise his own part or responsibility in relation to the clue. It is profoundly disturbing however, that whether or not a thing has meaning, a history or an aura attached to it, there is a complete absence of any palpable or lasting affect on Georges.

He stands before Majid who, without warning, slits his own throat, cuts off his own face, so to speak, before Georges, and we, the audience along with George watch as his blood splashes across the dirty walls of his shabby apartment. Georges then feels a little sick, but he leaves Majid bleeding on the floor of his apartment, and then goes to watch some movies. One supposes that he does this to forget what he has just witnessed in the flesh. He seems just as comfortable with his manufactured similitude of an innocent version of history, despite the shocking evidence of the outcome presented to him on videotape, and later filmed invisibly and impossibly from within Majid’s apartment. Obviously, what the observer sees and records no longer stands for the ultimate truth, almost as if the truth has become unrecognisable.

Mirroring the disturbing style of the opening sequence, the final scene in Caché also consists of a long, static shot with credits rolling across it. Entering on the left hand side of the screen is Majid’s son, who was introduced to us midway through the film but never named. Suddenly, although they have never met within the context of this film, he speaks (although we cannot hear what they are saying) with Georges’ son at Pierrot’s school. In the director’s disc, Haneke notes that half the audience notices this interaction, and the other half never sees
it. The body language between the boys tells us that even though they have no connection in the movie’s plot or storyline whatsoever, it now appears that in this dimension, they had been friends for many years. What does this mean? Haneke refuses to tell. Each person must take away with them their own interpretation of this last scene.

The interpretation that I finally came away with was that Georges’ dream of getting rid of Majid has melted into a dream about an alternate conclusion. What if Georges had accepted Majid as his brother and the two grew up together, enjoying the same social privileges that come with such an upbringing? The outcome might then have been that Majid’s son and Pierrot would attend the same school and have the same friends. In fact, they may have been like cousins and as close as brothers. Perhaps the last scene of the movie would have been indicative of this other, seemingly far happier outcome. But the reality is that Majid’s son is unnamed, he is unrecognised and since no mention is ever made of his mother, he appears almost as a cipher manufactured from thin air, yet even with his father gone, he still carries on.

Figure 11

The two sons: Left: A confrontation between Georges and Majid's son, in which Georges refuses any responsibility for his own or Majid’s actions. Right: Georges’ son Pierre in front of his school.

Haneke claims that what he is really seeking in making this film is a presentation of the truth. Previously, in speaking about his films he has said, “They are an appeal for a cinema of insistent questions instead of false (because too quick) answers, for clarifying distance in place of violating closeness, for provocation and dialogue instead of consumption
What interests him is how many different ways the truth in any situation can be construed and is dependent on each witness’ or participant’s perception of it, which is what will inform their version of it. The story in *Caché* is used only as a framework on which to hang the different points of view from each person’s concept of the truth, and the particular frame Haneke presents for us in *Caché* is meant to be the microcosm of a family representing the macrocosm of a society which is kept in line by both an interior and exterior system of surveillance.

Exposing the conditions of our ‘audiovisual regime’ by means of highlighting similitude as resemblance and using digital versus analogue technology, Haneke creates Georges as a reactive character rather than an active subject. Our audiovisual culture seems to have digitally replaced itself, and it is in this sense that the “loss of aura” is experienced; because the subject is missing in that there is a fragmentation of the subject, and so a loss of perceptual continuity. Georges has no active conscience because he has no continuity of moral events in his visual field, and therefore no activity shades his presence of mind. Even though the people around him and his memories and dreams prompt him to react, he chooses to ignore all and retreat.

All of these responses are aspects of the surveillance film genre, complete with an embedded problem: How do subjects reinsert themselves into the scheme of visibility and become active, with an embodied conscience? How do subjects become an ‘ethical subject’ in Hannah Arendt’s sense of the term? The dilemma is contained first in whether or not we are even aware that we have removed ourselves from the scheme of visibility. In our audiovisual regime, are we watching or being watched? In becoming desensitised to surveillance, we risk the loss of our conscience, and if this is true, what will take its place? When these ethical

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34 Michael Haneke, “Film als Katharsis.” *Austria (in)felix: zum österreichischem Film der 80er Jahre*, Francesco Bono, ed. Graz, Blimp, 1992, 89.
questions are revisited in Chapters Two and Three, I will call upon Arendt’s theory of action to tease out some of the potential answers.

Haneke uses his unique artistic style of direction and combines it with both startling new technologies and older theatrical methodologies to bring us to a point of discomfort so intense that one would hope we will take note of the disturbing subjects he addresses in Caché. Because digital filmmaking allows the desubstantiation and reassembly of images as well as their infinite reproduction, Haneke has chosen to use this technique to illustrate the existence of these possibilities. By presenting us with characters who perceive that something is wrong, but who are unable to wholly define exactly what that something is, we are further awakened to this notion in our own lives. In the end it is up to us to determine what action, if any, we will take.
CHAPTER TWO

Introduction: *Minority Report*:35 “Forgiveness is Freedom from Vengeance”36

When the desubstantiation of imagery that Haneke employs to conflate the real and the unreal in *Caché* is elevated to the level of filmic fantasy, it appears that in the near future-world of Steven Spielberg’s film *Minority Report* (2002), digital technology has reached an apex and become a near art-form combined with the practical capabilities of crime detection. The film is set in Washington DC in the year 2054, when a government slogan aimed at a fearful American population promises: “That which keeps us safe will also keep us free.” The dreamed, desubstantiated mental images of the future that appear in a downloaded form of visual montage back up this claim by using the images as justification for state-sanctioned pre-emptive strikes against pre-designated murderers who appear within these visions.

Promoting this ideological concept of “safety,” (meaning “control”) as equalling “freedom” (which means “being monitored”), allows a mechanistic regime of surveillance that has already been accepted by the public to be further embraced by the judicial system. When the concept becomes reality, it will be utilised to prevent crime and therefore erase guilt before it can ever be experienced.

Underpinning my argument against this preventative concept, are the ideas contained in Arendt’s theory of action. Regarding freedom, Arendt writes:


Man’s inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all. (HC: 244)

For Arendt, “relying upon the future” means that people are called upon to bring an element of faith into their thinking, their behaviour, or in other words, faith must become a functional part of their everyday lives. Attempting to create the future by “keeping [it] safe” does not guarantee freedom, but rather installs pessimism about human ends and ambitions.

The film employs as its source narrative Phillip K. Dick’s 1956 science fiction short story called “The Minority Report,” including the construct of the placement of authority for maintaining social control by restricting freedoms. In the film version of Minority Report, the central conceit concerns the possibility of surveilling crimes in the future via the visually accessed premonitions of three chemically modified human beings. Just as in Caché, we realise that through this visual access, we are in fact within the diegesis of the movie because we are simultaneously viewing what the Precrime police are seeing. Surveillance here operates as a “technique,” suggesting that crime has no moral content and that within the law technique appears to triumphs over both the letter and the spirit. In addition to having “real-time visual access, the police (and only the police), have the technological ability to “play back” and view the crimes before they actually happen, which enables the opportunity to change their outcome. The police, who are know as the “Precrime Unit,” have thus been charged with a power that nears omniscience.

Unlike Arendt’s underlying principles in her theory of action, in Minority Report, there is no allowance for the subject to be either reactive or active, because the state has taken on the mantle of ordaining preventative (or taking “pro”) actions. I discuss Arendt’s concept of action to illustrate what is at the core of these films; man’s potential to begin anew, to do
the unexpected, and cause a rupture, perhaps, where one is needed. Central to this concept is the notion that “the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (HC: 190).

Applying this to the concept of the existence of the human conscience, a question might then be asked: If guilt is wiped out in society, will people forego the development and maintenance of a conscience? Without conscience, there is no insight, and with no insight, any perspective beyond one’s own view is lost, meaning that the possibility of taking perspective itself has been lost. The lessons taught in Minority Report show how easily these attributes can fade away, and what happens when the state attempts to find substitutes to replace them.

Minority Report belongs squarely in the surveillance film genre. When we examine the film from a theoretical foundation of panopticism and social control, it is clear that Minority Report prompts discussions on law, political ideals, media technology, the recent and on-going “war on terror,” and the radical notion of “changing the course of history” by “foreseeing” and manipulating certain events in the future. The concept of combining human foreknowledge with a mediated technology for preventing crimes in the future creates an opening for a wide variety of critical interpretations on a number of different levels. Interestingly, each of these aspects tends to revolve around the core issue of contemporary society’s apparent reliance on (and disturbingly affirmative propinquity with) various systems of surveillance, which is also discussed in a similar manner to Caché through the means of a privileged or “diegetic” point of view.

In his essay, “Tell Us What’s Going to Happen, Information Feeds to the War on Terror,” Samuel Nunn writes: “We want to know things before they occur. Anticipate, react, prevent. This idea is not only a part of counter-terrorism policy, but in the cultural narratives
produced by television and cinema.” Nunn, speaking in the American context, supports the notion of film and television being: “self-reflexive mirrors of the U.S. war on terror,” with the ultimate goal of “complete deterrence.” In Nunn’s view, this goal can only be achieved in “real time” through the coalescence of the vast volumes of data located within the criminal justice technology systems: “It is a process identified by Richard Grusin as premediation: a shift of focus to controlling the future and stopping attacks before they occur, or more simply, profiling the future.”

In Richard Grusin’s article, “Premediation,” (2004), he defines “remediation” in which media “refashion prior media forms” by incorporating several aspects of media to create other media. Grusin expands on this by explaining how media (such as film, television and video games) pre-mediate the future, signalling technological devices yet to come (author’s italics).

Regarding Minority Report, he comments on the technology of precognition:

Spielberg imagines a technological medium that works by recording sensory or neural experience for playback. But in Minority Report, rather than capturing the past neural experience for playback in the future, the technology captures “precognitions” of the future for playback in the present — for the purpose of preventing the recorded events from becoming actual history, to prevent the future from becoming the past. 2004, 19

Although Grusin captures the elements of bio-technology and the time manipulations that are salient to the technicalities of the film, he fails to make any subjective connections between the events that never happen, the consequences that do not result, and what effects might be felt by the individual or an entire society living under this system.

Minority Report occupies a crucial position in the surveillance film genre, because it responded to the social and cultural concerns stemming from the immediate aftermath of


38 This article appeared in Criticism, vol. 46, No.1, 2004.
September 11\textsuperscript{th} 2001 and the subsequent feelings of public and private regret.\footnote{There is a point in the film when the date of September 11 is symbolically referenced as 1109. This is the number given to the main character when he is caught and held in “the Hall of Containment.”} Beyond grieving the very public loss of lives, there was considerable grief over the loss of control, as a sense of control it seemed, that had been a fantasy all along. Surveillance had failed miserably as an effective system of deterrent security, and the public could only watch the painful CCTV “re-runs” of the perpetrators as they boarded the airplanes that flew on to change the world. Although \textit{Minority Report} supplied the mourning public with a fictional surveillance solution with the theme of control, it also reminded people that freedom in fact, is not “free”.

In this chapter, I discuss how a state security system that links surveillance to the assumption of guilt and the subsequent prevention of events ultimately fails in its aim of achieving freedom. I attribute this failure to what Hannah Arendt refers to when laying out her premise for the theory of action as “the new” appearing in “the guise of a miracle.” One cannot assume that a person will follow through with what has been divined or prophesised by others because human actions are, in so many ways unpredictable: “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected of him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (HC: 178).

According to Arendt, there is also a genuine necessity to prove to oneself that the freedom to make a moral choice exists, and when the wrong choice is made, there must also be the freedom to forgive, and finally, “the function of the faculty of promising” (HC: 244). \textit{Minority Report} reminds us that at best, we prefer exalted examples of how to make our choices, rather than the safety of having a pre-determined “right” outcome chosen for us, even if it is supposedly on our behalf. Without this freedom, we have little motivation for having even pure intentions. Perhaps it is because we are a species burdened with the knowledge of our impending and undeniable mortality that we desire the unpredictability of making new
beginnings without the knowledge of absolute certainty as to what the consequences will be. Again, as Arendt puts it:

This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. . . And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before. (HC: 178)

The underlying premise of the Precrime programme contradicts Arendt’s notion of “startling unexpectedness” in that the outcomes are supposedly predetermined, but the methodology of the justice system suggests that the police are operating under a “conditioned free will.” The assumption is that unless stopped by police, the perpetrator has no choice but to act as predicted. Prediction, however, cannot be nor should be a legal fact, for in the case of law and jurisprudence there must be a sufficient causal link in order to hold a defendant liable for a crime.

In “Precrime Never Pays! ‘Law and Economics’ in Minority Report,”40 Senior law lecturer William P. MacNeil discusses popular culture and the law by examining how Minority Report presents “such an interesting example of. . . the way in which law is reflected in, but also refracted by, popular culture” to produce what he calls, “lex populi—or popular law” (201). MacNeil explains the “predictive theory of law,” which was advocated and coined by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.41 in the early nineteenth century. His theory follows the path of “law in action” emphasizing the law’s processes. Here, “predictive” means being able to reasonably predict the outcome of a court’s decision, because that decision will be determined by prewritten laws, rules, and regulations. MacNeil points out that this is entirely different from the “predictive laws” at work in Minority Report, where the


41 Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841-1935), U.S. judge and jurist, b. Boston Mass., taught law at Harvard in 1881, and eventually rose to Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, 1902-1932. Holmes is regarded as one of the great judges of the common law world and was profoundly influential in America and abroad.
government “circumvents the courts altogether in order to predict, and nip in the bud, the facts
of crime, rendering the rule system supernumerary” (204). The danger in this of course is that
when the rules are circumvented, they may as well cease to exist. Another danger to be
examined in the political society of Minority Report is that of a growing totalitarianism. For
instance, rather than specifically identifying the police as government agents, they are
“branded” as the Precrime unit. Meanwhile, the state uses television commercials to promote
their Precrime ideology. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt explains how the early
Nazi regime used “ingenious” similar techniques: “It is interesting that even in their
beginnings the Nazis were prudent enough never to use slogans which, like democracy,
republic, dictatorship, or monarchy, indicated a specific form of government” (OT: 357).

In Minority Report, the murder rate has increased to the point where the police cannot
possibly control it. People feel unsafe and insecure, and in reaction what they long for is
safety and consistency. By making the claim that they are able to view the one true and real
future, Precrime offers the promise of the consistent control of murders by prevention, thereby
insuring each individual’s safety, which in turn, should ensure society as a whole. However, if
that promise is false and there exists an alternate future, the entire system would disintegrate.
What we see in Minority Report is that when one system ends, another one begins to take its
place.

Directing in a Liminal Space and the Art of Reconstructing the Scene of a Crime

Spielberg presents Minority Report as a science-fiction story set in the near future
using what he refers to as the “ugly, grainy, rough and gritty look of film noir” visual effects.
He accomplishes this by filming predominantly in cool blues by using a bleach by-pass
system to remove much of the film’s original colours. Spielberg says his intention in creating

take the form of OT followed by the page number.
the film noir atmosphere was to take something from the past and apply it to the future. The stylised visual effects also help to create a dream-like ambience, which in turn creates a feeling of distance. Although we recognise some architecture and a number of common objects from contemporary times, we are meant to sense that the distance is temporal rather than spatial.

The movie begins with two objectives: to put us at the scene of a crime illustrating how the “Precrime” system works, and to establish how unreliable our eyes can be. At first we are presented with a deconstructed visual assemblage combining familiar albeit disturbing imagery. From what appears to be a nondiegetic view, we see two lovers, a man and a woman kissing, overtaken by the image of a pair scissors fading into it, and then suddenly whisked away. Throughout the scene, flashes of a house built in the classic style of the old, red-brick Georgetown architecture appear. Next we see a man struggling to leave a bathtub filled with water, then the director cuts to a different man tentatively climbing a stairway, scissors in hand. Jumping to a different view, we see the original man and woman through the lenses of a pair of eyeglasses on the nightstand near the bed, and the man from the stairway suddenly standing over them. The male lover scrambles off the bed and runs to the bathroom, while the other man begins to slash the scissors towards the woman who screams in fear and yells out his name. Finally, we are abruptly brought to a scene where the lover is being forcibly submerged in the bathtub by the arm of the other man. Although the framing is quite jumpy, this scene has up until now been shown in sections of forward temporal motion, however, at this point it becomes an abstractly reconstructed scene, shot in sepia and washed out blue tones, appearing from the perspective of several temporal and visual view points. What is remarkable is that the scenes have been technologically rendered from the minds of three precognitive human beings, and played out on a large glass screen.

The three are referred to as “Pre-Cogs” for short, and they consist of a pair of male twins, identified as Arthur and Dashiell, (played by Michael and Matthew Dickman) and a
single female named Agatha (Samantha Morton). Their formal namesakes originate from the authors of detective fiction novels; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (or Arthur C. Clarke), Dashiell Hammet, and Agatha Christie. They are presented to us not as people with personalities, but more as modified shadow creatures, floating in a container of an embryonic-like fluid.

Pre-Cogs, we learn, are capable of intuiting (or “receiving”) thousands of jumbled dreams and mental pictures, but only those that indicate acts of murder are considered worthy of viewing. The premonitions of the Pre-Cogs resemble a combination of almost colourless prismatic images as seen through a broken, sometimes out of focus kaleidoscope. Left without the ability to sort these images into any coherent narrative stream, the power to interpret their information lies only with the detectives who are conducting, sorting and deleting the discrete visual fragments.

Besides the Pre-cogs floating in liquid substance, there is a preponderance of symbolic destabilisations of imagery throughout the film by Spielberg’s use of water as metaphor. In “Minority Report, A Dystopic Vision” from Senses of Cinema, Lester D. Friedman explains in some detail:

. . . the water sprinkler in the Marks' front lawn rotates throughout the crime sequence; the Sprawl is filled with puddles and often seen through rain showers; Lara's hologram image wants Anderton to “watch the rain” with her; Anne Lively (Jessica Harper) is drowned in a lake; Anderton and Agatha leave the shopping mall in a downpour; Dr. Iris Hineman (Lois Smith) waters her exotic plants as she converses with the frustrated Anderton; Anderton and his now-pregnant wife Lara (Kathryn Morris) watch the rain outside the windows in their final scene; and the Pre-Cogs eventually live in a cabin alongside water. When Anderton seeks to escape from the surveillance ‘spiders,’ he immerses himself in a bathtub filled with ice water, though a single air bubble betrays him to the invading horde of mechanical spies. Most crucially, Anderton loses his young son while underwater: playing “how-long-can-you-hold-your-breath” with Sean (Spencer Treat Clark) at a public pool, he sinks to the bottom and, when he resurfaces, finds the child gone, abducted by an unknown and never-found kidnapper. . . As such, water functions as both positive and negative imagery throughout the movie, a component of meditative creation or psychological destruction.43

What Friedman is saying is that Spielberg seems to be relying on the physical symbolism of water to demonstrate how the desubstantiation of imagery through manipulation via digital technology can lead to their “potentially disastrous misuse.” In other words, what we were forced to surmise (eventually) on our own through Haneke’s use of digital technology in watching *Caché*, is a conclusion we are led to somewhat by the hand through a maze of both digital and “physical” (analogue) imagery in *Minority Report*.

What we are witnessing is a unique mode of surveillance, operating through the prophetic dreams that emanate from a trio of somnambulistic savants, endowed with what the state alleges are “perfect” predictive powers. Their dreams combine and project outside of their hive-minds’ eye and appear as a jumbled, audiovisual montage. Once the visions are identified as being the scene of a future murder, the entire event is streamed as digital images onto a transparent screen. It is left to the Precrime police unit to unscramble the puzzle within this visual and temporal assemblage. The murder is presented within a non-linear sequence of visual snippets, quite similar to the experience of watching an event before, during and after it happens simultaneously on several separate CCTV screens. At this point, a process known as “scrubbing the image” takes place, where the Precrime unit focus on the pertinent data, and then act upon it accordingly.

At this moment we are formally introduced to the film’s main character, Chief John Anderton (Tom Cruise) of the Precrime unit. The early scenes of Anderton disassembling the images, discarding what he finds unnecessary, and then reassembling them is by far the most brilliant. Again Spielberg combines past and present by using classical music played against futuristic technology. With Franz Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony* (No. 8) swelling in the background, Anderton’s physical movements gesturally interfacing the visions into temporal linearity create the appearance of conducting both the symphony and the imagery, seen flowing as downloads from the three minds of the Pre-Cogs.

Detective John Anderton engages in gestural interfacing to reassemble scenes from a future murder, as the images download from the hive-mind of the three Pre-Cogs to an interactive screen called a “holosphere”.

In this narrative within a self-reflexive narrative, Spielberg presents the Pre-Cogs visions of future moments in the more “natural” way that we perceive memories. The world outside their minds looks far more “Sci-Fi” than it does within their predictive visual output. It is also clear in this scene, that as allegedly perfect as their dreams of murder may seem to be, without the interpretation by the specialised Precrime unit, the haphazard linearity of their output is almost useless visual static.

The audience is given the connection between the Pre-Cogs and their neural output when, perhaps in homage to Alfred Hitchcock and the end of the famous shower scene in the movie *Psycho*, the camera zooms from above, descending down into an extreme focus on the iris of the eye of Agatha, followed by a rapid zoom shot of her entire ethereal face, floating in an enormous tank of filled with a liquid, milky substance. Technological embodiment is evidenced by the various wires and the head-phone like apparatus attached to her and the other Pre-Cogs. Agatha speaks haltingly as if she is talking in her sleep, pronouncing quite deliberately: “Murr - derr.” Slowly submerging herself, with her eyes remaining open under the bluish white liquid, air bubbles from her mouth rise slowly to the surface as if to prove that she is a living, breathing human being.

44 Alfred Hitchcock, director, Shamely Productions, USA, 1960.
Just as in *Caché* when Haneke introduced drawings on paper to create an “analogue connection,” it is interesting that at this point Spielberg brings us back to an earthly and earthly reference using natural materials. *Agatha*’s pronouncement triggers a hyper-speed laser machine lathe to carve out two reddish wooden balls from two separate blocks of wood, each engraved with the word, “VICTIM,” burnt into distinct wood grain patterns. After each ball has travelled through transparent plastic tubes and come to a rest at one end, we see the names of the two people who are meant to be killed spelled out before us. Cutting to Agatha’s face once again, we find her still submerged, with her mouth and eyes open (in silent horror), and appearing visibly uncomfortable. Next, we watch as another ball goes through the same routine, except that the word: “PERPETRATOR” with the killer’s name engraved into the wood grain of the ball. We learn that although premeditated murder has all but been eliminated, murder occurring as a “crime of passion” still exists, and is referred to as a “red-ball.”

Wearing gloves with tiny built-in projectors, Anderton selects and moves each piece of the visual data stream puzzle on a large, curved glass wall called a “holosphere,” giving the impression of both grace and control with his performance. He creates a collage of images that he can manipulate in a temporal-visual way, reminiscent of the backwards and forwards hand-winding of a reel to reel audio tape. Unlike the Schubert symphony, however, the background audio of the precognitive dreams combines an asynchronous mixture of sounds made up of words, echoes, weeping, metallic squeaking and voices screaming. In a time that has gone far beyond transcending Benjamin’s age of the mechanical reproduction of art, perhaps this is where the new art is created — in the form of expressive techno-visual detective work.
(Figure 12) Anderton’s gloves contain tiny projectors that aid in his image manipulation on the holosphere screen.

“You can choose,” Free Will, Determinism and Causality

The premise is that the Precrime unit, being synonymous with the state, has access to the future by means of a mode of surveillance that is accessed from the human mind and produced outside the mind using a digital wet-ware technology. Built into this technology is another human interfacing accessibility that enables the quick deconstruction and reconstruction of the events which, presented visually, may be reassembled to pinpoint their correct spatial-temporal location. The Precrime squad must assemble a correct picture of the future event before the event occurs if they are to reach it in time to stop it from happening. Time is truly of the essence because being too late will result in a predicted death.
The Precrime unit sorts through information previously known about the future, unlike the methodology used by contemporary policemen who in most cases, must react to each individual crime scene only by poring over clues left after the fact. Precrime judgements are made about what is or is not relevant to both the crime and the scene of an event that has not yet occurred. In some way this judgement is aided by an objectivity created by distance and the disconnection between the present and the future, but the objectivity is then cancelled out by the “knowing” used in making judgements. This is because any one person’s “knowing” is constrained by that person’s unique perception of what it is they presume to know.

Although there is a limited amount of time between the “pre-visions” and the occurrence of actual murder, the members of the Washington DC Precrime unit usually have just enough time to reach the crime scene in time to prevent the murder. In other words, they must arrive at a crime scene in the present, before the future event occurs. The Pre-Cogs are extremely accurate about predicting the exact time of a crime, so the unit takes full advantage of this by setting their watches as count-down devices in order to assist them in their task of pre-empting crime. In an early scene when the police do not have much time to apprehend the “future perpetrator,” an anxious policewoman urges haste by saying, “We’re catching up to the future.” What is interesting about this statement is that the present seems to be largely overlooked, and not particularly missed. Having been promoted as “never being wrong” to the point of a perceived perfection, the Pre-Cogs act as the supplanted conscience of a frightened population. Safety, not privacy becomes the most valued commodity in a society both weary from crime and driven by fear. As Anderton, who relies on their visions in order to do his job states, “The Pre-Cogs don’t tell us what you intend to do, they tell us what you will do”.

The task of Precrime is to prevent the murder from occurring by reaching the crime scene and arresting the perpetrator before the act is commit. In short, the police are charged with removing a pre-determined event from its assigned temporal location in what should have eventually become “history.” What is at stake here? I consider that the time and place
left open by the prevention of what should have been a pre-determined event is never adequately resolved in *Minority Report*. In other words, how is it that Precrime can get away with making an unarguable claim that something will happen, and then not only take the steps to prevent it, but actually complete the task of preventing it? Rather than answer this question, the question is simply removed from the discussion and replaced with propaganda in the form of a television commercial with an ideological slogan: “That which keeps us safe, keeps us free,” which is easier to swallow for a population worn out by fear of violent crimes than reasoning out the alternatives. The fact that Precrime’s stance is one of “hard determinism:”

... implying that at any time the future is already fixed and unique, with no possibility of alternative development. Logical versions of determinism declare each future event to be determined by what is already true, specifically, by the truth that it will occur then. Typical theological variants accept the predestination of all circumstances and events inasmuch as a divine being knows in advance (or even from eternity) that they will obtain.45

However, their methodology is contradictory, because the actions they take on the potential outcomes are based more on “soft determinism.” They act on the assumption that the perpetrator will commit murder if they are not stopped by the Precrime unit. But the very act of them stopping the murder from happening, thus preventing the death of another person, proves them wrong on the spot. Furthermore, allowing the potential victim to live or die holds within that act an infinite chain of other events that stem from a person’s existence or non existence. Therefore, the saying, “That which keeps us safe, keeps us free” is proven to be false by the action that is taken for maintaining the “safety.” How so? The perpetrator is denied the liberty to do other than that which the Precrime unit has decreed, by way of obeying premonitions of three Pre-Cogs, and taking it upon themselves to intervene accordingly.

It is Hobbes, Locke and Hume who spoke of liberty in this way:

... as the power of doing or refraining from an action according to what one wills, so that by choosing otherwise one would have done otherwise. An agent fails to have liberty when constrained, that is, when either prevented from acting as one chooses or compelled to act in a manner contrary to what one wills. Extending this model, liberty is also diminished when one is caused to act in a way one would not otherwise prefer, either to avoid a greater danger (coercion) or because there is deliberate interference with the envisioning of alternatives (manipulation). 46

How does this work? If the outcomes of major events are deemed to be known in advance, and those outcomes are prevented from occurring, something else must fill this void. If one event does not occur, something else will happen to take its place. In order to continue the control of events, I argue that the state must continue to manufacture other pre-determined outcomes to fill that void. There are themes at work in Minority Report focussing predominantly on man’s attempt to control final outcomes by using information pre-determined by others.

Surveillance is used for both identification and prevention by removal; as in identifying events in the future and then removing them from existence by state sanctioned decision. However, by erasing everything that happens before it can occur, the state operating the surveillance system is also obligated to find a replacement for the area of time that was erased. Later in this chapter, I look at how surveillance systems assist the state in identifying and categorising the general public, while simultaneously aiding in filling the various voids left by Precrime’s systematic erasure of people and events.

**Action, Narrative and Memory, the Temporally Deferred**

Located under the wider umbrella of the surveillance film, Spielberg’s film combines a number of aspects from different genres; crime, mystery, action and science fiction, creating

46 Ibid.
a dual visual presentation. *Minority Report* is shot with traditional film stock which he has chosen to make appear as consistently over exposed and cold, which is helped by removing the predominantly warmer colour tones. Spielberg’s aim to place *Minority Report*’s look in the visually cool, dark and gritty genre of film noir is achieved. Although visually effective, it is an awkward technique to match the look of the film at times with the “feel” of the story. Spielberg still maintains his almost pathological trademark of sentimentality in his portrayal of motherhood, the precious fragility of childhood, and as he calls it, “the sanctity of the family.”

Deviating further from Dick’s original short story, Spielberg places a number of characters within his ideal “movie family” dynamic. Lamar Burgess (Max von Sydow), as the paternal head of Precrime, acts as a father figure to (Chief) John Anderton, often referring to him as “my boy.” Burgess is fiercely protective of Precrime and has placed Anderton in the position of being the Precrime “poster boy,” where Anderton can be seen as the embodiment of a virile protector with a righteously vengeful axe to grind. Anderton represents a recurring character in the detective fictions of Philip K. Dick and functions here as the classic film noir character of the typically hard boiled cop with a troubled past. His hardness acts as the protective shield that he uses to cover the intense pain of having lost his only son in an instant when he looked away. His dedication as a police officer is fuelled somewhat feverishly by his vengeance towards anyone who would cause such sorrow to anyone else. The energy it takes to mask his sorrow with revenge, however, is painfully exhausting.

Anderton thus dulls his pain with the illegal mind-altering drug “Neuroine,” known casually on the street as “Clarity.” Anderton purchases Clarity in the run down semi-criminal area called the “Sprawl,” a name that references an earlier, but now built-over area of “urban sprawl.” He gets the drug from a dealer who has had his eyes surgically removed most likely to prevent him being “bio-identified” by the multitude of bio-metric surveillance devices placed ubiquitously in the city’s public places, and yet in his blindness he is somehow able to
identify Anderton by referring to him as “Chief.” When Anderton, realising he has been recognised turns to him, the dealer says, “Oh don’t worry none, your secret’s safe with me” and then concludes the transaction saying, “In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king,” perhaps suggesting the irony that Anderton who has two eyes still seeks “clarity” from a blind man. This Oedipal foreshadowing also signals a gruesome scene that comes later in the film.

Regardless of Anderton’s numbing use of Clarity, he still emerges as a dedicated hero to the relatively new Precrime system of stopping murder — and therefore destiny — before it happens, as an antidote to both private and public suffering. He doesn’t stop to consider the consequences of altering the future because he is too busy concentrating on stopping crime before it happens. It is as if the number of criminals he stops will at some stage nullify the quality of his personal experience of suffering.

The Pre-Cogs, who began their infancy as research experiment subjects in an attempt to cure defects caused by foetal drug damage, have been continuously monitored and altered neurologically, to focus their brain waves towards an enhanced production of precognitive dreams and visions. They are already physiologically predisposed to having predictive nightmares as the result of birth defects and have been groomed even further by the state through the introduction of chemicals to enhance their dreams of future murders. The birth defects in the Pre-Cogs were developed in vitro and caused by their mother’s over use of illegal hallucinogenic drugs. Ironically, these drugs were the stronger, rougher versions of the drug “Clarity” that Anderton now seeks on the street. The murderous visions they see in their dreams are touted as “a gift to society,” but they are of course, a dreadful curse for the three individuals who must endure the phenomenological experience of continuous nightmares.

Lara (Kathryn Morris), John Anderton’s still loyal ex-wife who is artistically creative and stoically sophisticated, is in the back-ground for much of the film. Near the end of the movie, she is called upon to defend and redeem Anderton. She represents the couple’s troubled past as well as their hope for the future. Presented as painful memory only, is their
abducted six-year-old son, Sean (Spencer Treat Clark), the victim of an unimaginable and unsolved kidnapping, presumed dead for six years since the inception of Precrime. The other predominately film noir character is Danny Witwer (Colin Farrell), a fast-talking, gum-chewing investigating officer from the Justice Department, who arrives on assignment as an unwelcome overseer for the Precrime project that Anderton and Burgess have been developing. Witwer has been “sent by Justice” to usurp Anderton’s position, if not shut down the project completely, an assignment which is bolstered by his somewhat esoteric view of human imperfection. He informs Anderton early on: “If there is a flaw in the system, it’s human. It always is.”

By setting the story in the near future, Spielberg enables us to imagine a somewhat realistic or at least believable place and time to reflect on some of the societal issues we face in the present. *Minority Report* also offers a platform for considering the concept and the consequences of a society’s complete acceptance of surveillance as a substitute saviour. This would not be difficult to achieve when the people want to believe that those predictive prophets who dream the future are located in a perfectly closed system and that their predictions are never wrong. However, by disguising predictions as true knowledge, combined with the use of “pre-knowing” and pre-set goals to control events that should be allowed to occur free of outside coercion, they will achieve limited success, and for a limited time.

After identifying the suspect /perpetrator with a portable biometric “eye-dent” device, the Precrime officer reads the criminal their rights under the familiar U.S. Miranda Act. However, they arrest the suspect as if they have already committed the crime, changing the phrase from: “I am placing you under arrest for the murder of...” to: “I am placing you under arrest for the future crime of murder...” Removing guilt before it happens allows the state’s Precrime system to look as though the state is protecting its people. However, by removing their ability to make moral choices, the state also removes their uniqueness and thus their
identities. It is also imperative that the state perfect this system of substitution and replacement before any feeling of loss can set in. Although much of life is predictable, when free, living amongst others in a pluralistic society is unpredictable. As Arendt puts it: “The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end” (HC: 233). When the state claims it can predict and control the future, the people let go of their ability to trust “not knowing,” which finally translates to a loss of faith. The notion of trusting the unpredictable and understanding the irreversibility of action is replaced instead by a fear of the mere potential of action.

**Loss of Faith is Replaced by Commodities**

In my discussion of memory in *Caché*, I proposed the metaphor that just as a pearl is attached to the two halves of a shell, human memory forms an attachment to two of the bearers of what I relate to here as Benjamin’s aura of authenticity; the conscience and consciousness. By this I mean that in nature, a true pearl is created only when the protective substance of nacre is released in reaction to an irritation within the oyster’s shell, in that what was originally an irritation is eventually transformed to a rare thing of beauty. My argument here is that the conscience also develops like the authentic pearl and will similarly form only after the irritation of guilt is introduced. The irritation of guilt occurs when there is knowledge that a wrongful act has been committed, and the protective reaction is, (or should be) that the wrongful act be rectified in some way. Guilt is the catalyst which begins as an irritant, but also holds the power to transform and become something above and beyond its origins — like an authentic (albeit “imperfect”) pearl.

For a jeweller there are two types of pearls, natural and man-made. Natural pearls are deemed to hold more beauty and are therefore more valuable. Ironically, the imperfections in a pearl are the cause of its beauty and worth. The random (and therefore imperfect) patterns form in the iridescent nacre, and, as it releases and swirls it builds layer upon protective layer,
until the eventual formation of an authentic pearl. The process takes many years, but the effect is that the pearl’s natural lustre produced by the uneven layers causes an inner ethereal glow, combined with an array of translucent colours that reflect and refract light off the surface of a pearl. Perfect in its imperfection, the natural pearl is so rare and mesmerising to the eye that it is utterly prohibitive in cost.

Conversely, man-made pearls are not nearly as costly. Their manufacture is controlled by pre-set systems and cheap materials for mass production. The inauthentic look of the cultured pearl is easily identified as by its different type of surface shine. There is no natural lustre glowing from within because true pearl nacre is not present. The point is that regardless of its increased proximity to uniformity, the more man interferes in the production of a pearl the less it will be a true pearl, and the less it will be worth.

In 2054, the state works towards nullifying unpredictability by removing the human equivalent of a nacre substance, the protective substance of guilt that causes the process of the imperfect or random layering that is vital to the production of the “lustre” or conscience in the individual. Eventually, people yearn to live with their imperfections (their unique identities), as they find more contentment or “value” in striving for the possibility of perfection rather than experiencing it first-hand, but only on a surface level. There is more fascination in contemplating what might happen (experiencing hope and placing faith in the unpredictable), than in knowing what will happen. And there is something else; by having the freedom to take action, a choice can to be made to commit a right or wrong act.

Here is how Arendt describes this process:

While the strength of the action process is never exhausted in a single deed but, on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply; what endures in the realm of human affairs are these processes, and their endurance is as unlimited, as independent of the perishability of material and the mortality of men as the endurance of humanity itself (HC: 233).
In *Minority report*, the state appears to replace faith with promises of predictability and safety and then offers in trade for their unique identities, which include their ability to make moral choices, a previously created persona from a carefully maintained data bank of citizen identities. This data bank is mined by an advertising regime, which in turn, triggers more surveillance and data collecting systems. Billboards with gigantic talking faces that appear as “interfacing advertisements” are so pervasive in the environs of *Minority Report*, that there is little or no personal space left for an individual to experience an original thought. Rather, public spaces become venues for constant reminders of recent shopping purchases. And so, in the name of safety, because the citizens of a “Precrime” (but now fear-based) society have been conditioned to give up making new or original purchasing decisions on their own, making complicated moral choices becomes far too burdensome. What develops in response to this constant conditioning is the citizens’ growing acceptance and dependence on the state to take action on their behalf, a dependence that may cause the eventual atrophy of their ability to view things from the perspective of others. What replaces this loss of the ability to take perspective is their passive acceptance of mechanical surveillance.

**Machinic Arrangements in the Audiovisual and Advertising Regime**

In *Minority Report*, the control mechanisms found in Foucault’s thinking and his application of Bentham’s all-seeing panopticon to societal hierarchies of power, knowledge and language come into play when at the pivotal point in the film the system seems to turn on Anderton when the Pre-cogs predict that he will be the perpetrator of murder. He is now compelled to stop himself from doing something he feels he has no intention of ever acting out. Here is where the narrative shifts, creating a context where the audience can now identify with the assumed (innocent) “criminal” and thus begin to criticise this technique of surveillance. In this plot twist, when Anderton discovers that he has been identified by the

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Pre-Cogs as the perpetrator of a murder, his first instinct is to flee police headquarters before being arrested. Hoping to lose himself in the crowd, Anderton rushes to a shopping mall where it quickly becomes apparent that surveillance exists in a multitude of forms at every turn, most especially in enormous screen advertisements that call out his name in recognition. This identity recognition occurs because of the invisible and ongoing exchange of information between bodies and machines. Although this section of the movie is brief, its meaning is repeated several times in the film and acts as a critical commentary on today’s growing use of digital point to point digital communication. What appears at first glance as the blatant over-use of gigantic product placements for cheap props, or perhaps a tongue-in-cheek reference by Spielberg to American consumerism is better read as a darker view of our future.

As Anderton and the general population walk through buildings and streets, or ride on public transportation, invisible bio-mechanical connections are made, information is coalesced, sorted, stored and then dispersed in a rhizomatic fashion throughout the various databases and audiovisual architectures of the society that Anderton lives in. Further definitions of this phenomenon may be found by returning to Rodowick’s examination of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s sense of the term *agencements machiniques*, or “machinic arrangements:”

In its most fundamental definition, an agencement is “machinic” in that it continually articulates, connects or constructs in the pursuit of desire. Desire itself is machinic in that it seeks to produce: collectivities, organisations, territories; in short, “assemblages” (RF: 219). Machinic relations are social relations or networks expressing force and organising desire. An *assemblage machiniques* is thus a collective organism characterised by a particular will to power and conceptualisation of force. (RF: 220)

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48 I use the word “rhizomatic” in the sense of Guattari and Deleuze to indicate that a great deal of the world is layered, striated, and often full of invisible or “underground” connections. To paraphrase Patricia Pisters in her work *The Matrix of Visual Culture*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, “Multiple forces, movements and rests, powers and affects constitute it. It is fundamentally related to an immanent world, surrounded by virtual and actual images and sounds of all kinds,” 224.
So it is that everywhere Anderton goes, personal recognition by cheerful digital billboards seems to follow. The advertising techniques featured in the film functions as both bait and mirror in a dataveillance oriented system that masks the growing totalitarianism behind its use. Culturally and aesthetically, audiovisual culture has finally been overtaken by an audiovisual regime, replacing art created by individuals for the purpose of expression, with desire, by algorithmically directed advertising visuals that interact on an individual level.

In the time and place set forth in Minority Report, people have become comfortable conducting themselves in quasi-social interactions with human simulacra, and cosily interface with technology on such a quotidian level that eventually they bargain away their privacy and their freedom in exchange for “security.” Surveillance assemblages are generously striated in public settings, as advertisements, gimmickry and security check points. As the distance between humans and technology decreases, where might “the social bases” of Benjamin’s aura (and its “contemporary decay”) be located in this future world, if they exist at all? Benjamin’s concern was the concept of the aura of origin or authenticity versus a celluloid version of its portrayal for the masses in film and photography:

It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses of contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of reality by accepting its reproduction. (WMR: 224-225)

In Minority Report, however, reality may be further away than it appears, and the task of recognising the aura concerning authenticity in this film is particularly challenging because we are taken beyond simply determining the “real” in present time. Relationships with real people may be replaced by the synthetic sociability of a talking billboard. Technology creates the illusion of intimacy regardless of the actual distance of real human touch. The assemblages of advertising information are created by applying combined computer digital
database information and holographic advertising, and result in sophisticated simulacra. Camera surveillance is automatically triggered by human biometric face and eye identification and demonstrates how dataveillance interfaced with lurid visual graphics creates a seductive and dangerous superpanoptic⁴⁹ imbroglio of information. It is in this way that the billboards are employed as feedback loops, both for control by the state and amplification by the advertiser.

Foucault’s theory of discipline and power through panopticism applies to this futuristic world of data collection disguised as advertising:

The Panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men’s behaviour; knowledge follows the advances of power, discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is exercised. (1997): 204⁵⁰

The advertisements in Minority Report seem friendly and sociable, and should serve as a warning bell for the contemporary audience. As we are presently driven by consumer capitalism, it should not be a far stretch for our imagination to comprehend the idea of accepting talking billboards as believable and perhaps even to judge them as a potential form of art. There is no argument about whether the “audience” for these billboards is “active or passive” because the audience is in fact rendered “interactive,” which gives them the impression that they are in some sense, “in control.” As Foucault also noted in Discipline and Punish, there is a definite imbalance of power between the observer and the observed (DP: 223). The observed are not privy to the degree of observation they are under, nor are they aware of the type and amount of information being gleaned about them during observation, therefore they have no way of knowing what is being alone with this information once it is


⁵⁰ Michel Foucault. Discipline and Punish, the Birth of a Prison. London: Penguin, 1997. Frequent referencing will take the form of DP followed by the page number.
gathered. So, although seemingly benign and alone not sufficient to be considered true “ideologies,” the eye-catching advertising billboards nevertheless pave the way for more insidious forms of control.

*Minority Report* may be seen as a making a comment on many of today’s deceptively engaging, clever and creative advertisements. Posing as music videos, some of contemporary society’s most sophisticated television commercials are technically and audiovisually as accomplished as small, independent films. As forms of mixed audio and visual art, music videos are intensely discussed and critiqued with an almost scholarly fervour. The audience, often youthful and impressionable, possesses a complete and knowledgeable familiarity with their subject. What may possibly be overlooked by this passionate young audience is that the television channels devoted entirely to playing their music videos exist for the sole purpose of creating the desire to purchase a variety of different products. By selling the viewer CD’s, DVD’s, downloadable songs, movies and any other products advertised between each music video played, the television channel remains a viable commodity for the owner. The young audience may be so subsumed in their fascination of viewing an audiovisual “work of art,” that the economic motives of the television channel’s unknown owner remains of little or no interest to them.

In the film’s society of 2054, just as it is in 2008, individual consumer preference is gleaned by using their electronically stored historical purchasing patterns in the hopes of urging (ordaining) future purchases. The concept of product placement in the future is turned upside down however, because products now use “people placements” to advertise themselves. Through these friendly and familiar means of machinic arrangements, information is mined invisibly from within the individual’s electronic history, and then spread silently and rhizomatically throughout the entire state system. In *Minority Report* it is not difficult to understand the problems of resisting the beautiful, friendly faces of models digitally projected onto billboards, as they shout out their friendly, conversational, and
“personal” messages to subjects passing by. These “messages,” however, are actually purchase suggestions created by advertisers by accessing and activating information culled from a collection of massive digital databases.

As history has shown, to encourage pseudo intimacy from within systems and in this case, the electronic information systems of our present and in the future of Minority Report, is dangerous. Here Spielberg mirrors the public’s growing sublimation of familiarity with this very methodology of information collection and use. This same technique is also one of the chief ingredients in the recipe for creating a totalitarian regime. Similar techniques are used to create a collective fear emanating from a world within a world. In the film, it is the world of an ideology which holds that prediction is necessary for the prevention of all murders.

In The Origins of Totalitarianism Arendt explains some of the true goals of Fascism:

Totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, namely, through the state and a machinery of violence: thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in this apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within. (OT: 325)

The digital audiovisual regime set forth in Minority Report does not subdue its population by marching in with jackboots or breaking down doors in the middle of the night and taking prisoners; rather, the population is subdued and soothed through its increasing, almost symbiotic cooption through ubiquitous advertising. Rather than presenting a future so far-fetched that it would be considered a complete fantasy, Minority Report maintains one foot in contemporary society by referencing currently fashionable and globalised consumer goods. An audiovisual assemblage of recognisable advertising brands created with a collage of materials gathered from both data and biometric surveillance tools is somewhat reminiscent of the mise-en-abime of visual constructs present in Caché, where one finds the boundaries between the diegetic and the nondiegetic somewhat blurred. In Minority Report, Anderton
sees himself in the minds eye of the Pre-Cogs committing a murder and in the reflection of his face on the holosphere screen where he is watching it.

By layering current real TV news footage imagery in *Caché*, Haneke created a phenomenological striation of media and memory. Here Spielberg uses “universally” familiar — familiar to global consumer society — product placements in his film to ease us into a future which seems eerily comfortable, in the same reductive way that one may equate what is familiar with being harmless. He also includes Anderton’s face on someone’s television screen in a commercial for the American television show, *Cops*, and as a fluid image photograph on the back of a *USA Today* newspaper.

Sometimes our fear of the unknown overwhelms us when in fact the danger really lies in a known entity we can identify and so therefore, with misplaced confidence, we choose not to avoid. Rodowick examines the way misrepresentation of dystopia is created through the visions of a capitalistic utopian dream (RF: 230). Internet technology has made the once exotic or forbidden quite familiar. Rodowick also discusses the concept of value as it relates to the virtual: “The value of access to information is determined not by spatial quantity (weight, volume, or number); rather, it is measured by units of time” (217).

*Minority Report* demonstrates the potential results of our growing familiarity with commerce via open-ended virtual exchange, which both eases and erases the social and economic consequences of being in the place where the thing is made, and not using the local currency funded to purchase it. Allowing unfettered global access to a localised and therefore intrinsically cultural commodity effectively dissipates the uniqueness of a commodity, which, like another example of the “disappearing aura,” ultimately means that its value will be diminished.
At the present time, we are already bound to accept the growing desubstantiation of culture, as new-media historian Lev Manovich states in *The Language of New Media*\(^{51}\), (2001):

As distribution of all forms of culture becomes computer-based, we are increasingly “interfacing” to predominantly cultural data - texts, photographs, films, music, [and] virtual environments. In short, we are no longer interfacing to a computer, but to culture encoded in digital form. (69)

I suggest that beyond the simple digital storage of data, the transformation of language into code may take a further step, which detaches meaning further from its original truth-context. Desubstantiation takes place in forms other than the visual— knowledge, art, language— all are altered by the translation system so that certain pieces of information may be indexed, altered or excluded. In Spielberg’s film version of the near future, the systematic audiovisual regime is portrayed through (seemingly) interactive billboards that appear as though they can recognise an individual as they pass by and even respond to this recognition (much as a friend would call out to another friend on the street) by speaking to them in a familiar way, while continuing to maintain a graphically polished style. These advertisements replace the aesthetic cultural value of the audiovisual, because “culture” and its “distinctive outlook” are simply no longer considered a necessity. Once the need for individual distinction is removed, the citizens under Precrime may find that relying on the dreams of others is an acceptable choice, and will choose this over making their own moral decisions.

*Caché* carried a warning about the effects of distanciation; now *Minority Report* shows us some of the potential consequences of excessive interaction (interfacing) with machines. Driving home a problematic set of dualities, Rodowick addresses the notion of apparent or assumed interactivity, (such as thinking that a billboard is interactive when in reality; it is being only reactive), in his chapter, “An Uncertain Utopia —Digital Culture”:

This is a question not simply of what happens on the screen (cinematic, televisual, or computer) but of how these technologies serve to define, regulate, observe and document human collectivities. The goals of interactive computing and communication that are in the vanguard of research on new electronic media, while genuinely utopian, must nonetheless be questioned, for the dream of the individual’s absolute control over information is simultaneously the potentiality for absolute surveillance and the reification of private experience. The deciding factor involves political questions concerning the controls over centralization and access. (RF: 72

A false intimacy is created by the use of personal data accessed through advertising technology, reinforcing the ethos behind the Precrime programme which is that the state knows better than you, by accessing precognitive proxies whether or not you will commit murder. If the general public accepts that categorised shopping habits are capable of being invisibly resourced as a way of “knowing” a person, why should anyone mistrust the capabilities of all-knowing, all-seeing visions of three mystics known as Pre-Cogs?

Spielberg admits that this film is obsessive about looking and seeing. He presents the panoply of references to visuality in general, often using duality relationships to support them. We are presented with vision versus visions, what is seen and what is revealed, relationships between subjects; the eyes and “I” of the individual, and then the eyes of the state, constantly surveilling and bio-tracking human eyes, leading to the categorisation of the collective “I’s.” However, these relationships of duality also connect to all of the major plot developments in the form of “interfacing.”

The general population of near-future Washington DC, and one assumes, all across America, is recognised by eye scanners referred to somewhat neologically and in familiarity as “eye-dents.” Under the guise of its user-friendly nickname the eye-dent is a biometric tool for facial recognition, honed to identify any human subject via the iris of their eye. This is how billboard advertisers “know” their subject by employing the eye-dent to identify the person who looks at their advertisement. Having once been referred to as “the widows of soul,” the eyes of 2054 are now an open doorway for triggering an access to a computerised...
data stream of personal information and, in the Foucauldian manner, may be used for identifying, sorting, categorising and ultimately controlling the population.

Just as the eye-dent activates a pre-set but seemingly “individualised” advertising pitch by referencing the person’s name (and therefore identification) to the subject in the hope that such personalised attention will evoke a purchase from the respondent, the central authority of the state also has access to this information. The glittering displays of commerce are meant to act as a secret conduit to the state system of categorising its citizenry. Outwardly, these displays distract and distance the populous from contemplating these notions, and also help to reduce the connection between the reality of living people and the consequences of the purchases they make.

**Argus Panoptes, Christ and the Oracle: Longing for the eye of God in the Regime of Visibility**

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt explains the concept of what was originally called “natural law” in medieval times, as “positive law:”

By lawful government we understand a body politic in which positive laws are needed to translate and realise the immutable *ius naturale* or the eternal commandments of God into standards of right and wrong. Only in these standards, in the body of positive laws of each country, do the *ius naturale* or the Commandments of God achieve this political reality. (OT: 464)

“The eternal commandments of God” are hinted at in a scene before Anderton has been identified as the next murderer, in which Witwer, Anderton and other members of the Precrime police force engage in a theological discussion about the Pre-Cogs while observing them as the trio float serenely in their opaque bath of what is described as “image enhancing photon milk.” Witwer sounds almost wistful when he speaks of the Pre-Cogs: “In a way, they give us hope of the existence of the divine. I find it interesting that some people have begun to deify the Pre-Cogs.”
Chief John Anderton and Detective Danny Witwer discuss politics and theology in the holding chamber of the Pre-Cogs, referred to as “The temple.” Note the design pattern on the walls behind appear as crosses with lights shining through the centres making a reference to Christian symbolism.

Played by the actor and Irish native Colin Farrell, the character of Danny Witwer is also conveniently Irish by designation. This ethnic heritage of origin and the slight Irish lilt in Witwer’s accent is used in a way that I found both stereotypical and somewhat hackneyed to introduce a decidedly Christian theme to the film. Witwer opines, “Science has stolen most of our miracles,” as he gazes heavenward within the domed house of the Pre-Cogs referred to as the “temple.” At least on one level, we can surmise that God is sorely longed for by many in the society envisioned in Minority Report. The Pre-Cogs are shown floating in their tank in the manner of a three-chambered unmistakeable trinity. They have been previously described as having a “hive-mind,” which we learn is crucial to their premonition and is threatened with extinction should they ever be separated into three individuals. Numerous Christian references and references to other deities are inserted into the text of Minority Report creating what appears to be a fabulation of immanence among many of the lesser characters. In this society, where there is no need for a conscience, there is still a desire for something beyond specified, humanly channelled premonitions to replace it, and perhaps God or even “the gods” are the replacements. It could be that the concept of being under constant surveillance is a comfort, but only when that surveillant can be conceptualised as a derivation of an ancient, historical
god-like being. Hardened by a personal trauma which precludes his belief in God, Anderton
snaps back sarcastically, “Pre-Cogs are a pattern recognition filter, that’s all.” Witwer, who is
prone to theism, regards the Precrime system as extremely suspect, and without giving too
much away about what he really thinks, seems to combine the elements of both arguments to
explain why they might be defied: “The oracle isn’t where the power is, anyway. The power
is with the priests, even if they had to invent the oracle.”

Other awkwardly theistic tropes are employed throughout the film, including one of
the Precrime police making the gesture of the cross over his chest as he is whooshed up a
futuristic pipe to the awaiting helicopter. Other members of the force are heard exclaiming,
“Oh my God!” One rather unscrupulous character, named Rufus Riley (an Irish surname), is
moved to shout in amazement, “Jesus Christ,” upon discovering that he is in the presence of a
real Pre-Cog, as he simultaneously drops to his knees, as if in supplication. He then proceeds
to “confess his sins” to Agatha, who removed from her safe world of photon milk is now
disoriented and confused. When safe in the “temple,” the Pre-Cogs are filmed in an ethereal
light, and dressed like wingless angels. As soon as a criminal is captured, they are kept
subdued by a kind of mechanical mind-stunning contraption encircling their head which is
referred to as “being haloed” (or hallowed). Furthermore, when the future criminal is captured,
they are “stored in the Hall of Containment,” where the occupants are physically in an almost
cryogenic state, but as the biblically named character Gideon, the gate keeper of the Hall says,
“on the inside, [referring to their minds] they are busy, busy, busy.” We are allowed glimpses
of the endless loop of hellish thoughts playing and replaying on their transparent containers,
and we can equate this to being trapped in a purgatorial place; their own murderous minds.
These references, and many more like them, do not weave together to make a whole cloth of
Christian overtone, rather, they are slotted in at moments, sometimes ill-fittingly. It is as
though they have been placed within the dialogue, but not in the plot in order for Spielberg to
bring forward the age-old debate of free will versus determinism.
The manner in which these Christian cues are presented could be taken as a negative comment on the Christian epistemological system, but perhaps Spielberg employs the mention of Jesus Christ in reference to the New Testament identification of the arrival of the true Messiah to contrast to the Old Testament’s version of seeking the true Messiah who has not yet come. Other New and Old Testament themes are also clearly present such as the Old Testaments’ “eye for an eye” version of vengeful justice coupled with Spielberg’s heavy use of visual iconography, versus the Christian ethos of forgiveness and the appearance of motifs of the Trinity. Despite the references to these two doctrines, what the characters seem to sense is that something else is missing. With an almost complete elimination of murder, even though the world may now feel safer, it does not somehow, feel natural.

The proliferation of talking billboards with their identification capabilities is reminiscent of Argus Panoptes, the hundred-eyed guardian monster of Greek mythology. The Judeo-Christian God of omnipotence, omniscience and judgement still exists in the thoughts of many, but the Precrime system and all of the spaces hollowed out and left open by preemptive methods of state control have made surveillance the replacement god of these people. On a much deeper and more pertinent level to the concern of the present analysis, Spielberg seems to make over-arching religious and mythic historical connections between themes of prediction, seeing, and the all seeing. When Anderton discovers that there is the possibility of a minority report, and hence, the chance for an alternate future, he exclaims, “Jesus Christ, why didn’t I know about that?” The answer to this is that Anderton’s ability to take perspective has been dulled by his pain and his self-medication. Here I define “perspective” as “healthy surveillance,” issuing from within, based in the conscience, with the ability to view in duo. The way one personally sees something, and the way in which others might see that same thing as well.
Agnes and Anderton, locked in the pose of the two heads of a Janus coin, one looking backward and one looking forward in time, and also being able to see both sides of a situation, thereby gaining perspective.

**Ideology versus Perspective; the Discrepancy between Legality and Justice**

If one event is prevented from happening, what will happen in its place instead? In *Caché*, besides being reminded of our deepening immersion in the increasing enormity of our digital visual culture, we are also brought to a precarious tipping point; where we imagine the inability to distinguish between audiovisual culture and what has become audiovisual regime. In *Minority Report*, the ability to identify the audiovisual regime is no longer salient, all that matters is security, by whatever means the state decrees — provided that the state creates a palatable ideology to support its actions, and as long as crimes of murder have been statistically reduced to nil. However, as Arendt points out: “Ideologies are known for their scientific character: they combine the scientific approach with results of philosophical relevance and pretend to be scientific philosophy” (OT: 468). In Arendt’s view, a crime-free society does not necessarily mean a healthy society. In concept, the prevention of murder as a security measure by way of surveillance emanating from predictive human nightmares interfacing with technologically has become less of a practical crime deterrent and more of a political movement. To prevent a crime on the *assumption* that it is destined to happen is

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eventually destined to remove “all opposition” to the measures that the state is willing to take against its citizens under an ideology of “safety as freedom.” Arendt explains:

Just as positive laws, though they define transgressions, are independent of them — the absence of crimes in any society does not render laws superfluous but, on the contrary, signifies their most perfect rule — so terror in totalitarian government has ceased to be a mere means for the suppression of opposition, though it is also used for such purposes. Terror becomes total when it becomes independent of all opposition; it rules supreme when nobody any longer stands in its way. If lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination (OT: 464).

The society portrayed in *Minority Report* is ruled by law not as the last recourse, meaning it is not a system called upon and adhered to in reaction to a crime, but rather law as a state security system using technology backed up by omnipresent surveillant systems, not only of precognition, but active surveillance in the form of mechanical robotic “spyders” that seek out people in surveillant identification to separate them into suspects and innocents. There is no permission sought for cooperation, and unlike the characters in a typical film noir narrative, the citizens are not asked to “come downtown for questioning.” Surveillance here foregoes any pretence of political correctness; the acquiescent subjects are located behind bathroom or bedroom doors. Here is the proof of the “essence of totalitarian domination” that Arendt speaks of. They know to stand still at attention while their eyes are pried open and inspected for purposes of bio-identification.

The citizens of Washington DC in 2054 fully believe that the law in the guise of a designated security system is infallibly trustworthy, because they have been convinced that the Pre-Cogs are never wrong. Therefore, it follows that any decisions made by the law must also be trusted. In opposition to their unshakable belief in the inevitability (and correctness) of future events occurring, there exists the paradox that the characters of both Anderton and
Burgess still have the capability of exercising free will, which we see in their incredible displays of self-control later in the film.

Writing on ideology, such as on the catch phrase, “that which keeps us safe keeps us free,” Arendt concludes that: “Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction” (OT: 470). The paradox is that both Anderton and Burgess are able to break free from ideologically based “logical deductions.”

At a crucial point in the film when Anderton faces Leo Crow, who is an alleged child-molester and the man he has been predestined to murder, Crow also claims to be the murderer of Anderton’s son, Sean. Nevertheless, Anderton manages to prevent himself from intentionally killing Leo Crow. How is this possible? Apparently the Pre-Cog Agatha is either able to convince Anderton to make a choice other than the one that she has envisioned for him, simply by saying, “You can choose,” or Anderton manages to call forward his “free will,” thus cancelling out (what was found to be false) “determinism.” This presents the first assertion in the narrative of free will over determinism, because what Agatha means when she says, “You can choose,” is what Arendt maintains is the key to breaking free from the “tyranny of logicality,” it is to “start thinking.” Arendt says that thinking is “the freest and purest of all human activities [and] is the very opposite of the compulsory process of deduction” (OT: 473). As we saw near the beginning of Minority Report, Anderton had become a lonely and isolated man, a predicament which in Arendt’s view is “the common ground for terror, the essence of the totalitarian government and for ideology and logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims” (OT: 475).

What is odd here is that Anderton has spent the last six years of his life completely convinced that the Pre-Cogs are never wrong in their visions and that they don’t know what they are talking about outside their predictions. Of course Spielberg is telling us that we are
actually autonomous agents of our own destiny, gifted with the ability to make independent and individualised decisions. Even Burgess, in the penultimate scene where he stands in a classical face-off with Anderton, resists the overwhelming urge to shoot him, and instead manages to turn his gun armed with the “golden bullets symbolic of peace”\textsuperscript{53} upon himself, thus ending his life.

The irony is that both Anderton and Burgess have been the most vehement proponents of Precrime based on precognition, and yet each demonstrate through their sheer force of will that they can choose alternative forms of action based on their individual decision making. However, neither man is put in the position of not having the liberty to make a choice, in other words, unlike the other people under the rule of Precrime, Anderton and Burgess have access to the luxury of deciding to go against what has been foretold, or in Burgess’ case, choosing his own consequence based on his admitted guilt—only after being publicly revealed through another visual display.

A desperate Anderton is caught in the middle of another typical film noir scenario\textsuperscript{54} of the wronged man trying to escape prosecution, and at the same time being compelled to find the real criminal (or clue) that will exonerate him and restore justice to his dire situation. And so, after a daring car chase\textsuperscript{55} and escape, Anderton lands just inside the property of genetic scientist Dr. Iris Hineman, who is the only person who can give him answers. Her placement in the middle of the film is used to facilitate a way of explaining to Anderton (and the audience) that it is possible for the Pre-Cogs to make a mistake, but that this fact is hidden

\textsuperscript{53} At his retirement party, Lamar Burgess is presented with an antique gun and golden bullets, as a parting gift from his secretary. Burgess then explains to his guests the significance of the gift by telling them that in the old Civil War days, when war had ended, the troops presented commanding Generals with guns loaded with gold-plated bullets, symbolising the end of the war and destruction.

\textsuperscript{54} See: Robert G. Porfirio, \emph{Film Noir Reader}, “No Way Out, Existential Motifs in the Film Noir.” “Set down in a violent and incoherent world, the \textit{film noir} hero tries to deal with it in the best way he can, attempting to create some order out of chaos, to make some sense of his world” (2001, 92).

\textsuperscript{55} The car chase scene is preceded by what I argue is a series of scenes created in reference to the concept of “Man merging with technology.” First, there is a shoot-up scene using weapons of the future that only blow huge gusts of air which is played out in a completely robotically automated car factory. Anderton miraculously escapes Witwer and the Precrime police by actually being built right into the car that he drives off the factory room floor and then escapes in as his failed assailants look on in frustration.
through Burgess’ pragmatic decision to omit making public information about the existence of a “minority report.” The minority report is a record of an alternative vision (and therefore an alternate version) of the future experienced by one out of the three Pre-Cogs. Hineman tells Anderton that the minority report is “stored, but not declared.” Because Anderton is convinced that he is innocent of any future murder, he desperately wants to know where the minority report is. She tells him that the place where it is stored is actually within the Pre-cog who predicted it. I interpret the report as being not only the immediate rendition of the vision, in the way that the negative is authentic to the photograph, but again, like the conscience, which is “stored within” and is authentic to each individual.

Here, in the location of a Hineman’s greenhouse filled with genetically modified plants gone somewhat mad, we learn of her previous partnership with Lamar Burgess and how the Pre-Cogs came to be. Hineman thus provides Anderton with his own alternative view of the Pre-Cogs as real, suffering people and far beyond the mere “pattern recognition filters” he has seen them as until now. He also sees Lamar Burgess as being less than the altruistic father-figure he had always seemed to be, as he learns that there are imperfections in the system that he and Burgess have both upheld as the indisputable truth. It is at this point in the film that Anderton begins to gain what I argue is surveillance in its most positive human form, and that is as perspective.

In order to obtain his own minority report, Anderton must kidnap Agatha from the Temple (dislodging her from her dream world), and after undergoing the surgical removal of his eyes, he must have them replaced by the eyes of different person, dislodging his detectable identity from his body. Agatha, the Pre-cog with the greatest “seeing power,” who is also searching for someone to bring her mother’s (Anne Lively) murderer to justice, becomes Anderton’s “guide.” In this case, Spielberg chooses a male Asian identity, as if to point out an example of living as “the other,” and being erroneously identified as such. Ironically, it is Anderton who must be blind
in order to seek justice, or, as Hineman muses poetically, “Sometimes in order to see the light, you have to risk the dark” — but not too much risk, as Anderton cleverly insists on keeping his original eyes for future use.

The ocular-centric theme in *Minority Report* is displayed most graphically in a scene where Spielberg pays homage to both the play *Oedipus Rex*, and to Stanley Kubrick’s film, *A Clockwork Orange* (Warner Brothers Pictures, 1971) when Anderton voluntarily has his eyes surgically removed in order to escape detection by the cities seemingly inescapable eye-dents. Like the character of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, Anderton is tied down and his eyes are forcibly pried and propped open. Anderton thinks he will be able to prove his innocence by finding the alternative or the possibility of a different outcome in the “minority” view of the future. In his haste to do so, however, we can see that he continues to rely on the potentiality in the premonition of another, (just as Oedipus, once blinded, must rely on a guide) over his own decision-making until later, when his ultimate realisation is that his future will be based on certain choices that only he himself can make.

**Conclusion: “Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive; Unpredictability and the Power of Promise”**

The character of Anderton’s ex-wife Lara becomes prominent towards the conclusion of *Minority Report* as the long-suffering yet loyal and forgiving mother-figure. Her somewhat unusual reason for divorcing Anderton was not because she blamed him for losing their little boy, but because her husband reminded her too much of her son. This leaves her in the faultless position of having loved her son so much that the memory of him, caused by the nearness of someone else she also loved, was simply too painful for her to endure. Lara is presented as a film photography artist who, by 2054 would probably be considered as an artist working with a rare, antique medium, and, as Spielberg is noted for his resistance to shooting

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movies using digital technology, this resistance is his homage to the medium, perhaps his hope that this “authentic medium” will never die out or be completely replaced. More importantly though, is the fact that here photography seems to be touched on as Spielberg’s trope of authenticity and a connection with a happier past, bringing us back to Lara, the (previously) loving wife and the mother, and also the hope for Anderton’s “authentic” future to appear at the end of the movie.

Spielberg delivers a privileged and somewhat exalted view of Lara when Witwer visits her to try and ascertain John Anderton’s whereabouts during his escape. At first, she is presented as a dignified and charming hostess, offering coffee to Witwer and asking him if he “takes anything with it.” Witwer answers, “Cream and sugar.” At this point, Lara says that she doesn’t have any cream, but turns to retrieve the sugar. When Witwer reveals why he is actually there, which is to probe her for information about Anderton whom he hopes to capture and send to the Hall of Containment for the murder he has been predicted to commit, Lara becomes indignant. She shows it by refusing Witwer sugar for his coffee, and then she curtly asks him to leave. This is Spielberg’s conventional way of accomplishing two important tasks to advance the plot. The first is to show the empowerment of Lara, (who must boldly rescue Anderton in the next few scenes). The second is to inform us that she is still fiercely loyal to her ex-husband (giving her the proper motive to rescue him), whom we now begin to regard as “John,” rather than as “Anderton.” It is as if Lara’s increasing feelings of “closeness” to her ex-husband draw us in as well.

It is at this pivotal point in the film that the crucial concept of forgiveness is introduced. When Witwer paints a crude version of why Lara may have left John, by moving in quite close to her saying, “I heard it’s because he got lost in Precrime instead of you,” she stands her ground and refutes this self-centred version of why she left John by explaining to Witwer: “It wasn’t his fault” (that Sean was lost), and “every time I looked at him, I saw my son, every time I got close to him, I smelled my little boy, and now you can leave.” When
there is no blame, or rather, when the choice not to blame is voiced, the opportunity for
vengeance is removed. The emotion in her voice tells us that she still loves John, (whom she
never blamed in her heart in the first place), and he is now officially forgiven. Vengeance is
replaced by forgiveness, and its replacement occurs only through the personal choice that
Lara makes. Lara is able to choose forgiveness because she is able to take perspective: she can
see outside herself and she can see how others see.

Later, when Anderton shows up with Agatha at Lara’s cottage, Agatha is miraculously
able to tell John and Lara what Sean’s alternate future would have been had he lived. She
begins by saying, “Dr. Hineman says the dead don’t die, they look on and help.” Apparently,
the ability to envision being looked upon by Sean is the first step for John and Lara to take in
the healing process of their relationship. Then, in poignant detail, Agatha muses dreamily
about the different stages of Sean growing up, describing his fondness for running, his
engagement to a girl named Claire, (referencing Clarity), and so on. By this time, Lara and
John are quietly sobbing together in the background, indicating that because of their
continuing love for one another, their forgiveness of each other and John’s forgiveness of
himself can at last be complete. Forgiveness is necessary as the final step towards supplying
Lara with the motivation to risk danger in order to rescue John from the Hall of Containment.
When he is haloed and placed in his containment cell, we are shown that his particular cell is
Besides being a futuristic answer to the world’s insecurity about failed security, the reference
to September 11th concerns the dangers of reacting without thinking, and seeking vengeance
in a pre-emptive strike against unproven enemies to prevent future crimes.

The end of Minority Report contains the message that one should choose forgiveness
over vengeance, and that forgiveness is possible only through love, that imperfect,
unpredictable and therefore authentic action. In The Human Condition, near the end of the
chapter “Action,” Arendt explains forgiveness:
If it were true, therefore, as Christianity assumed, that only love can forgive because only love is fully receptive to who somebody is, to the point of being always willing to forgive him whatever he may have done, forgiving would have to remain altogether outside our considerations (242-243) . . . here, as in action and speech generally, we are dependent upon others, to whom we appear in distinctness which we ourselves are unable to perceive. Closed within ourselves, we would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive (243).

In the film’s final voice-over, John Anderton tells us that when it was discovered that Lamar Burgess had murdered Agatha’s mother in order to keep Agatha as the most gifted Pre-Cog, Precrime was effectively eliminated and “all prisoners were pardoned or paroled, although police kept watch on many of them for years to come.” The audience’s desire for revenge is satisfied, not by Anderton killing Burgess and saving the day, but by Burgess’ own hand.

In the scene where he and Anderton are pressed against each other in their mutual struggle to gain control of Burgess’ antique gun with the gold-plated bullets, Burgess shoots himself in response to Anderton’s half-taunting and half-lecturing him about “making the right choice.” The choice is to shoot and kill Anderton, which would mean that Precrime didn’t work, or to let Anderton live while Burgess ends up in the Hall of Containment for the crime of murdering Agatha’s mother. When the gun goes off, Burgess says his final words to Anderton: “Yes, I made a choice. Forgive me, John, forgive me, my boy.”

Burgess chose to end his own life rather than face the consequences or take responsibility for his actions, proving that the society that was forming under the Precrime system of security through surveillance, was indeed on its way to becoming a totalitarian regime, and, as I argued earlier, doomed to fail. Meanwhile, in the final sequences, John and Lara Anderton are shown standing together, contented, because Lara is visibly pregnant. This underscores Arendt’s concept of natality: “The miracle that saves the world . . . the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born,” within her theory of action,
supports the notion that faith in an unpredictable future will be chosen over having no choice but that of known security — especially when the state has chosen it for you.
CHAPTER THREE

Introduction: *Das Leben der Anderen / The Lives of Others* 57

A “Web of Human Relationships” 58

Written and directed by German filmmaker Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 59 the story in *Das Leben der Anderen* 60 is set in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the capital city of East Berlin, in the year 1984. In this film von Donnersmarck portrays the presence of surveillance as being imbued with an almost human physicality, a treatment that corresponds with Arendt’s phenomenological examination of political life as a lived experience, predicated on human action. Surveillance plays an integral part in an entire political system in which constant, mass surveillance permeates the population. The fear of being seen, heard or caught doing something the State does not approve of is ever-present.

Although located in the genre of the surveillance film, *Das Leben der Anderen* is at times more akin to being an “anti-surveillance” film that is thematically focussed on the ethical redemption of the Stasi operative, Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler. As an unknown overseer, Wiesler has a privileged view because only he is capable of having an almost complete awareness of the wide scope of activities surrounding the people he is surveilling. While it is his duty to report certain activities, it is also his personal choice whether or not to do so.

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57 *The Lives of Others*, (2006), GR, AU, FR, GB, and USA. Written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. The film was the winner of the 2007 Academy Award (USA) in the “Best Foreign Language Film of the Year” category, and also garnered seven “Lola” awards, (Germany’s version of the Oscar Awards) for Best Film, Best Director and Best Screenplay.

58 Hannah Arendt. HC: 184.

59 From here on in, he may also be referred to as “von Donnersmarck.”

60 From here on in, *Das Leben der Anderen* may also be referred to as *DLA*. 
Wiesler has not been coerced into being the surveillant of the other characters in the film, in fact, the idea to watch and listen to these people in particular was originally his own. Thus, known only to him and other Stasi operatives, Wiesler finds himself a “newcomer” in the lives of others, with the unexpected result that his voyeuristic surveillance becomes the ground for a revelatory self-reflection, which brings this film to its culmination.

The consequences that occur as the result of his surveillance stem from the specific actions he chooses to apply to an already “existing web of human relationships” (Arendt) which are his subjects: the actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedech), her lover, playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), and by association, their various friends within the theatre and literary network of East and West Berlin. My aim in this chapter is to examine how the device of surveillance, which is designed to enforce totalitarian control of artist’s lives in fact, undermines these same pretensions when its chief perpetrator, Wiesler, undergoes an ethical transformation.

As in Minority Report, a system of surveillance enforces a totalitarian government based on an ideology of state-sanctioned mistrust. In contrast to Caché, the other surveillance film I have considered, the action of surveillance by the “lonely figure” of Gerd Wiesler serves to create a web of intimacy within the human relationships between the characters, rather than an isolating, mechanical distance. It is the manner in which such a web of intimacy is created that I wish to call attention to this chapter.

In The Human Condition, Arendt’s discussion of modernity includes some of Benjamin’s hermeneutic strategies for re-connecting the break or the “rupture” from the past by identifying moments of deracination in history. Her aim is to reinvigorate the significance of traditional Western philosophical concepts and thus recover the “aura” Benjamin spoke of, and find its relevance for the future. In Arendt’s version, the process of thinking enables us to dissolve our fixed thoughts, behold our accepted rules of conduct, and thus prepare the way for the deeper process of judgement.
It is through Wiesler’s act of reflecting, as in becoming conscious of his thinking that he is led to making a judgement on what action to take in this particular situation, and so finally, he is able to break through the hermeneutic bubble of his loyalty to an unjust system. When he develops his perception to see how others see, he is thus able to turn his mechanistic system of surveillance away from harming his subjects, and instead, use it as a means of protecting them. Just as John Anderton came to realise the humanity within the three Pre-cogs in Minority Report (no longer seeing them as mere “pattern-recognition filters”) contrasting with a new way of seeing Lamar Burgess (less of a kindly, altruistic father-figure and more as a controlling cog in the wheel of the state machinery), Wiesler becomes aware of the existence of the individual conscience within each of the people he is listening to, the more his own conscience is revealed to himself.

The turning point of the film occurs when the usually stoic Wiesler consciously decides to anonymously alert Dreyman in such a way that he enables him to “discover” an illicit relationship that exists between Christa-Maria and a powerful party member. The evidence he views occurs on the street nearly right outside their door. Wiesler presses two wires together with an uncharacteristic energy bordering on glee, and by choosing to connect these wires, he and his action become a catalyst for an event by causing the doorbell to ring in the apartment below, which Dreyman assumes is a neighbour who has forgotten their key. It is when he goes to answer the door that he becomes privy to the activities in the street. He does not reproach Christa-Maria; instead, he hides from her, keeping her secret. Wiesler disapproves of what is going on between Christa-Maria and the party member but, powerless to take any real action to stop the incident, he reveals what is happening to Dreyman. Is he trying to hurt Dreyman or somehow correct the poor behaviour of a higher up in the Socialist Party by exposing him and “the truth”? Although completely alone, it is in this cruel moment that Wiesler chooses to remark aloud, “It is now time for some bitter truths.” His role as a Stasi agent is supposed to be that of a shadow, unknown and unseen. He should be strictly
observer and then only a reporter. Instead, he becomes a catalyst within the “web” of relationships under his surveillance, which in turn affects his own “life story.”

Arendt explains:

The disclosure of the “who” through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. (HC: 184)

Wiesler’s act of connecting the two wires occurs at the same time that he disconnects from his previous mode of action, which seems to have been based on a stale, unconscious loyalty to a corrupt and immoral state system. This disconnection serves to awaken Wiesler; his conscience, previously buried under years of dogmatic habits begins to be revealed. As a result of this, Wiesler becomes increasingly self-aware and so begins to question what was once the unquestionable — his duty to the State. Almost immediately after this scene, we find Wiesler in his own apartment, and again, the sound of a doorbell almost identical to Dreyman’s rings as if to serve up another “bitter truth” — reinforcing the personal truth of Wiesler’s lonely and empty existence, when a prostitute arrives at his door for a pre-arranged visit. Arendt argues that when one engages in the act of self-dialogue, they realise that their ultimate duty is to be able to live with their own deeds, and that they will come to this conclusion: “I am my own witness when I am acting. I know the agent and am condemned to live together with him.”

Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler, a Stasi agent and a master at surveillance.

Wiesler watches a television monitor that shows the outside entrance of Georg and Christa-Maria’s front door. Next to the monitor is an authentic piece of Stasi surveillance equipment.

This shot of Georg and Christa-Maria lay in bed reminds us that someone is above them listening to their every intimate word.
“The Web of Relationships and the Enacted Stories”

Von Donnersmarck portrays the streets of Berlin as noticeably empty of automobiles which shows a lack of prosperity and the signs of a dwindling population. As surveillance of one kind or another is perpetrated by the Stasi who have thoroughly mastered their craft, its presence is perceptibly felt or simply assumed to be invisibly present as it monitors the population of East Berlin. Pedestrians react by hurrying past one another, never making eye contact and protectively pull their coats tighter to their bodies as they pass. Distrust and fear permeate the avenues, yet von Donnersmarck’s portrayal of the constant intrusion successfully establishes surveillance as being efficiently quotidian and almost perfunctory, much like the performance of daily bodily functions.

In a scene where the installation of surveillance equipment in the apartment of Dreyman and Sieland is carried out by Stasi agents, they employ Teutonic efficiency with careful but jarring abruptness. The acts of drilling into locks, the rough yet delicately precise insertion of microphone wires becomes visceral when a muffled tearing sound emits from behind the wallpaper. Visually, the wires to appear almost like veins growing beneath flesh. The attic above the apartment holds elaborate and historically authentic recording equipment, which is impressive with its display of dials, switches and knobs that invoke a loose representation of the brain or central nervous system of the surveillance operation. Finally, Dreyman and Sieland’s apartment, which is filmed mostly in warm golden tones, appears warm and safe, like a cocoon surrounding “the soul” of their home.

Outside there is little evidence of “democracy” at that time in the German Democratic Republic’s system of government. Indeed, the citizens of East Germany are equal, but only in their likelihood to be monitored by the State. The act of surveillance and its repercussions (from the information gleaned in observation and reported to authorities) are shown as having

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62 HC: 181.

63 For *DLA*, von Donnersmarck was able to obtain the actual machinery used by Stasi agents from a collector in Germany.
the capacity to influence their future through destruction or redemption. The possibilities for either outcome are mirrored in the choices that three main characters must make when they are faced with the personal and political dilemmas that von Donnersmarck sets out for them in the film.

Wiesler’s surveillance of Sieland and Dreyman enables him to listen to their music and their love-making and their conversations. This seems to spur him further into a surveillance of personal curiosity. He thoughtfully inspects their belongings, reads their books and looks longingly at their bed. These personal actions result in two pertinent developments to his character and also to the story; his recognition of their humanity, and his emerging respect for them. Somewhat more astonishing is the fact that he also reveals an aspect of himself which he did not know he possessed — the ability to consider life outside his own self-imposed wall of political ideology, instrumentality, and consequent indifference to others. Surveillance has forced Wiesler to confront another world view based on his recognition of others. Wiesler must make a choice between the potential imprisonment of himself or his subjects. Informing his superiors about the politically subversive artistic activities of his subjects would result in their imprisonment. On the other hand, should it ever be discovered that Wiesler is in fact protecting his subjects by not reporting their true behaviour; it is he who will be punished in some way by the Stasi.

Christa-Maria must choose between enduring the sickening and unwanted sexual advances of her extortionist in exchange for continuing her own and Dreyman’s career. Refusing his advances means being blacklisted or arrested, removing all hope of furthering their careers in the theatre. Her dilemma occurs in triplicate. If she redeems herself, their careers are destroyed; if she chooses instead to save their careers, she also destroys her self-respect and her worthiness as a person for — as she later puts it, “getting into bed with them.” Her resolve is unsteady and further weakened by a drug addiction that both enables yet also hinders her ability to survive her degradation.
Georg Dreyman is Christa-Maria’s lover and partner, and has attempted to live a double life to please both the political regime and his colleagues in the radical theatre crowd. He experiences a profound emotional impact upon learning of the suicide of his old friend, the once famous and respected theatre director, Jerska, who finally hangs himself in despair ten years after the SED⁶⁴ has blacklisted him from his position amongst the cultural elite. Although his blacklisting came as the result of Stasi informers reporting his oppositional ideals long ago, Georg feels somehow responsible. Dreyman longs to redeem himself by justifying his friend’s existence to the world. But he compromises his own safety and comfortable position within the “acceptable” East German artistic circles by writing a subversive article for West Germany’s politically charged Der Spiegel magazine.

Dreyman is finally inspired not only by Jerska’s suicide, but also by his friends and lover pushing him to “act” somehow against an increasingly restrictive and punishing GDR regime. Written anonymously Dreyman’s article uses Jerska’s suicide as an introduction and then exposes the way suicide statistics in the GDR have gone unreported after growing alarmingly high. The risk of being discovered as the author of such an article would mean at the very least a long jail sentence. Dreyman is only able to take that risk because unknown to him, Wiesler, who is aware of what is taking place, comes dangerously close to turning him in to the authorities, but in the end, makes the choice not to do so. By observing his Stasi comrades in action, Wiesler becomes painfully aware of the moral corruption and systemic decay within the regime of the GDR. He is made aware of what will happen to Dreyman if he is sent to prison, and, even worse than physical torture, the result of his imprisonment would be the destruction of his creative soul, something Wiesler can no longer be a party to.

But the motivation for the main character in this film to engage, in these “smallest acts” is to be found elsewhere in Arendt’s work. In her essay, “The Crisis in Culture,” she puts forward her ideas on judgement from a political point of view, based on Kant’s concept

⁶⁴ SED: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, (Socialist Unity Party of Germany).
of “the ability to see things not only from one’s own point of view, but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present.” 65 She refers to this as the ability that the Greeks called “insight” or “common sense.” Arendt is building up to her conclusions on “thoughtlessness” which came to her in the form of a question she asked herself as she was reporting on the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem:

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it ‘conditions’ men against evildoing? 66

Thus the themes and the “aura” of Das Leben der Anderen centre on redemption through self-sacrifice, an ethical act committed in secrecy, and survival as a result of artistic experience. By listening to and observing his subjects during his surveillance, Wiesler discovers both their humanity and his own.

Voices from the Outside

The English playwright William Congreve’s famous lines of 1697: “Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast / To soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak,“67 are echoed in von Donnersmarck’s claim that his original inspiration for writing the script and making the film Das Leben der Anderen stems from the romantic notion of art triumphing over evil. In an interview with Emanuel Levy, von Donnersmarck refers specifically to Lenin’s comments to his friend, the writer Maxim Gorky. Gorky notes that Lenin is described as being enraptured when listening to Beethoven’s sonatas to the point of finding it difficult to

65 Hannah Arendt. Between Past and Present; Six Exercises in Political Thought. London: Faber and Faber, 1961, 221.

66 Hannah Arendt. Eichmann in Jerusalem. London: Faber and Faber, 1963. Frequent referencing will take the form of EJ followed by the page number.

67 From the play: The Mourning Bride, Act I, Scene 1.
concentrate on the business of carrying out a violent revolution. As von Donnersmarck cites Gorky’s reflections on how he recalls Lenin remarking:

“I know of nothing better than the Appassionata and could listen to it every day. What astonishing, superhuman music! It always makes me proud, perhaps naively so, to think that people can work such miracles!” [Then,] Wrinkling up his eyes, he smiled rather sadly, adding: “But I can't listen to music very often, it affects my nerves. I want to say sweet, silly things and pat the heads of people who, living in a filthy hell, can create such beauty. One can't pat anyone on the head nowadays; they might bite your hand off. They ought to be beaten on the head, beaten mercilessly, although ideally we are against doing any violence to people. Hm-what a hellishly difficult job!”68

This impressed von Donnersmarck: “It showed me how much the ideologue has to be at war with his own humanity to pursue his ideological goals.” He reasoned that, if such an impression could be left on him — that beauty and art could subvert someone from their original intentions — why not explore more deeply the potential of their effects on those who are trained to be ruthless? Von Donnersmarck continued, “I thought; let’s see if I can find a way of telling a story where a Lenin figure would be forced to listen to the Appassionata just as he was getting ready to smash in someone’s head.”

In examining the director’s inspiration for creating the film and conceptualising the main character’s motivation to act, I am bound to concur with the idea that listening to the music and the voices coming from the people Wiesler is surveilling could produce the effect of arousing his conscience. By listening in on Dreyman’s telephone call and discovering that Jerska has committed suicide, he hears Dreyman play the “Sonata for a Good Man” on his piano. He also knows, from snooping around the apartment, that the music he is playing was Jerska’s birthday gift to Georg. The music, which emanates from outside his natural realm, causes Wiesler to experience an emotional epiphany and a revelation of sorts.

68 Maxim Gorky, Soviet author and friend of Lenin’s reflects on V.I. Lenin in an abridged essay.
Von Donnersmarck’s use of Wiesler as a “Lenin figure” is, however, simplistic and somewhat absurd. It makes little sense to compare a mere cog in the gigantic GDR dictatorship in the form of a rather emotionally repressed Stasi agent who is quickly overpowered by sentiment, to Lenin, the mass executioner and tyrant. Wiesler has his political principals, dislikes arrogance, and is fiercely loyal to the ideology behind Socialism. Gareth Dale, an academic and author who is an expert on the rise and fall of the GDR, also finds the Lenin comparison a gross political misrepresentation. In his recent article in *Debatte*, on the GDR in German Cinema69, Dale acknowledges the veracity of von Donnersmarck’s realistic settings and authentic atmosphere. When he argues against certain aspects of what he says the media has “unfailingly presented . . . as good, true and brave,” however, Dale dismisses the notion of any “bravery” brought in the director’s portrayal of Wiesler as a Lenin figure:

Von Donnersmarck’s film is, patently, anything but brave: There has been no shortage of denunciations of the Stasi, not in 1990, not today, nor at any point in between. Although it does not join any witch-hunt—its heroes, after all, are both communists—neither is it a trailblazer in highlighting the Stasi’s nefarious ways. In this, it follows the mainstream. Nor is its didactic motivation especially courageous: Attacking Lenin is unlikely to antagonise establishment opinion, while the substance of the attack, von Donnersmarck’s advocacy of “feelings over principles,” is simply an affirmation of standard Romantic fare. It won’t attract criticism but it should, for von Donnersmarck grossly misrepresents Lenin. In the “sweet nothings” quote, Lenin agonises over his situation and voices his abhorrence of violence. For him, the worlds of “art” and “feelings” are essential parts of the humanity that he passionately wishes to see flourish; it is tragic that a humane society could only be achieved via social conflict, even civil war. It is, moreover, absurd to model Wiesler on Lenin, whose principles were antithetical to those of East Germany’s “communist” leaders. The latter, in 1984, were agonising not over the dilemmas of violence in revolution and civil war, but over the soaring price of oil and the ballooning national debt. (161)

Heinous consequences can result when there are no artistic or even reasonable “voices” present to reveal the miracle of humanity during the times when making such judgements is crucial. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem; a report on the banality of evil* (1963), Arendt reported that what resulted from the very absence of any “voices from the outside to arouse [Eichmann’s] conscience” was chilling (EJ: 112). The voices that might have caused him to examine his actions were “missing,” according to Adolf Eichmann. The result of this in part was that Eichmann’s “murderous zeal” for killing Jews in Germany was so easily carried out during his twelve years in the Third Reich. In other words, Eichmann claimed that nothing and no one was heard to tell him that he was wrong.

What Eichmann is saying is that his total lack of perception that he was committing evil acts can be blamed on the silence of others. The consequences of silence for such actions could be Eichmann’s excuse for committing the acts he did, or for allowing the acts of others under his command to go unchecked. Arendt makes the case that Eichmann was the product of his environment, and by this she does not mean bad parenting, but rather, the entire German society during the reign of the Third Reich. His own faculties for thinking and therefore his ability for possessing the necessary insight for making humane judgements were developed in a world of mendacity:

Eichmann needed only to recall the past in order to feel assured that he was not lying and that he was not deceiving himself, for he and the world he lived in had once been in perfect harmony. And that German society of eighty million people had been shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same deception, the same lies and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann’s mentality. . . But the practice of the self-deception had become so common, almost a moral prerequisite for survival, that even now [1963] eighteen years after the collapse of the Nazi regime, when most of the specific content of its lies has been forgotten, it is sometimes difficult not to believe that mendacity has become an integral part of the German national character. (EJ: 47)

In Wiesler’s case, living in a place and time where one would assume they are under constant surveillance would have its own vitiated outcomes, because it meant having your life quite
literally depend on how you were seen and heard to behave. Wiesler lived under circumstances that were the consequences of the political worlds that Lenin and Eichmann created and fell prey to. I contend, however, that part of Wiesler’s “arousal of conscience” stems from listening to the music and voices of Georg and Christa-Maria. It was this arousal that spurred him to protect his subjects, and their humanity, which is an extremely uncharacteristic action for a typical Stasi agent to take. Quite unexpectedly for Wiesler are the “seeds of boundlessness” sown in the voices and music when he hears them. Even if they were unintentionally spoken and not played for his benefit, the rupture that occurred as a result of his response to them creates a “change in every constellation” (HC: 190).

The Motives of Others

We can view Das Leben der Anderen with the understanding that von Donnersmarck’s entire life has been lived beyond the real shadow of World War II, which precipitated the creation of East and West Berlin, the Berlin wall and the Cold War. As an artist, he is undoubtedly talented and creative, but it is important to note here that he is still a relatively young director in terms of taking on a project set in the Cold War epoch of East Berlin. Yet because the historical background of the Stasi is so well documented and is now readily accessible, the film succeeds in conveying the feeling of a lived experience.

Von Donnersmarck’s background is German. He was born in Cologne, West Germany, in 1973, but his father worked for Lufthansa Airlines and his family moved to New York City when he was only two years old. His father’s work, which centred on travelling, enabled knowledge of East and West Berlin to be introduced to him first in 1981 when he moved back to Germany with his parents. Quite precocious at the age of eight, he reported that he found Germany to be “crass.” After subsequent moves with his parents, first to Frankfurt and then to Brussels, his views became broadened, but his age at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall was still just sixteen. After graduating from high school, he studied the
Russian language in Leningrad, and then economics, philosophy and politics at Oxford University. He also enjoyed what he called Oxford's “visual self-containment, the fact that you live within specific aesthetics, as if in a film”\textsuperscript{70} so much so that after Oxford, he studied Film at the Academy of Television and Film in Munich. What von Donnersmarck may lack in genuine experience of the GDR he most certainly has made up for in his attention to authenticity in all of the details in the composition of this film. He and his production crew did everything within their power to create the sense of living in the time and space of East Berlin in 1984. Original furniture, fixtures and equipment were researched and used, from Stasi filing cabinets to authentic manual typewriters. Contemporary graffiti had to be painted over on a daily basis to reconstruct the reality of the stark, blank greyness of the Berlin buildings.

Unlike \textit{Caché}, which was utterly devoid of any musical sound track, music in \textit{DLA} is almost always present, either foregrounded as the plot motivator for the characters or played in the background to convey the popular music of the time. Presented here is an artistic work that is well within the surveillance film genre and which therefore merits further critical analysis.

Benjamin’s discussion of art in the age of mechanical reproduction with regard to cinema might be applied here. Even though film, in the first place is already a reproduction of the lived experience, film remains a useful tool for rendering lived experience. As Benjamin puts it:

\begin{quote}

Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye —if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man (WMR: 238). . . . The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him. (WMR: 252)
\end{quote}

Benjamin defends film on the grounds that through film, the “social transformations” that occur from historical events can be understood in the contemporary mind using a contemporary medium. He defends any “decay of the aura” from the reproduction of an historical event on film, because “it is possible to show its social causes” (WMR: 224).

Von Donnersmarck’s comment on visual self-containment is demonstrated in his approach here to portraying self-reflection for the GDR Cold War epoch by using contemporary visual culture’s film as his medium. His perspective, I argue, is still culturally located from a predominantly mediated view. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why having won seven major German film industry awards and the American Academy Award, the film enjoys a wide, international popularity. Das Leben der Anderen may well carry a familiar voice that many of today’s contemporary film audiences recognise from their own predominantly mediated lives.

“The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception” 71

Within the GDR, it was the Stasi that enabled the State to monitor the citizenry. On February 8, 1950, with the assistance of the Soviet intelligence community, the East German government established the Stasi. Set up to maintain and preserve the communist regime in the GDR, the methods used to carry out this task operated outside the law, involving widespread networks of up to 200,000 civilian informants as well as 91,000 employed staff members. 72 The original Stasi agents were trained by Soviet KGB agents but by 1984, the period portrayed in Das Leben der Anderen, the main character, Wiesler, is a native of the GDR, and is now expert enough in his own role as a Stasi agent and highly successful

71 Walter Benjamin. WMR: 225.

72 Paraphrasing information found online at: www.espionageinfo.com/Sp-Te/Stasi.html.
interrogator to be training other young students for the same position. Wiesler’s character has
the ability and is routinely given the opportunity to be ruthless. This is portrayed in his
character by his coldly self-controlled, physically stiff and slightly robotic appearance,
combined with his didactic manner of speech. The film invites us to assume the worst of this
man until we are introduced to other characters, who at first may seem more familiar and
almost warm to us in their comparative informality to Wiesler but soon after are discovered to
have a deep, cold, core of self-serving corruption at the heart of their existence.

Although the historical documentation about the Stasi organisation reports that at least
one-third of the East German population was victimised by Stasi surveillance, arrest,
detention or torture, Wiesler’s potential for fictional redemption is made possible through
certain potentially malleable characteristics that he possesses. He is a man who may have
initially been driven by his loyalty to the highest ideals of the “Enlightenment Marxist,” and
the concepts held within the Communist Manifesto; the destruction of bourgeois society via
the expropriation of private property, its centralization in the hands of the state, the
dismantling of the bourgeois institutions, and faith in the leadership of the Communist party
that possesses the laws of history. With the passing of time however, one’s beliefs may be
watered down to become habit, rather than a continuously burning passion. As Dale explains
further in his Debatte article on the GDR in German Cinema regarding Stasi agents: “If
their—and Wiesler’s—loyalty was to ‘principles’, then these involved little more than
securing the power structure of which they were well-maintained components” (161). Such
original loyalty, however, can be sourced from an inner wellspring of a passion that is
unrealised in any other sense of the word, and, like Lenin’s professed natural, human (and yet
shunned) reaction to Beethoven’s Appassionata, this passion may be subverted in another
direction, perhaps one that is more compassionate, even romantic, rather than ruthless.

The Shield and Sword

There are several other characters who display a much deeper and truly ruthless side. On the surface, Oberstleutnant (First lieutenant) Anton Grubitz, (played by Ulrich Tukur) the character who is Wiesler’s boss and former school mate, appears somewhat like the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Grubitz is always looking for ways to place his actions, whether moral or immoral, in order to promote his career. Without a trace of guilt or formal acknowledgement to his cohorts, he uses the more learned shoulders of students and comrades as rungs in a ladder to advance his own position amongst the more powerful members of the Central Committee.

Grubitz does have one redeeming feature, and that is his honest admission about his lack of intellectual prowess, a lack which he further concedes is made up for by his acts of cleverness. Early in the film we are introduced to him entering Wiesler’s classroom at the end of the lecture applauding at Wiesler while leering at the female students as they leave. Grubitz, who is the Head of the Department of Culture brags to Wiesler about being promoted to professor in the school where they both train Stasi agents. He confesses easily to the now lower-ranked Wiesler that back when they were classmates he had advanced himself by copying Wiesler’s work. This is Grubitz’ unabashed version of a compliment to Wiesler! It becomes apparent through a number of exchanges between Grubitz and Wiesler, that in these dark and suspicious times, the two of them have a relationship that passes as a friendship. Wiesler, however is trained to be especially suspicious and distrustingful, and assumes there is another reason for Grubitz to come visiting, so he asks him, “What’s up?” Because Grubitz is aware that Wiesler knows him quite well, he admits almost transparently his penchant for ulterior motives by replying with a self-mocking defensiveness, “Why do you always think I am scheming?” He then invites Wiesler to attend the theatre as his guest. Wiesler, who considers that an outing at the theatre is grossly uncharacteristic of Grubitz, says with curiosity masking his distrust, “Theatre?”
Grubitz admits that his motive is to make an appearance at the theatre in order to be seen by his boss, Minister Hempf (Thomas Thieme), who is also attending the play. Situated above Wiesler and Grubitz in rank and power, Minister Hempf’s character embodies the physical and psychological perversion of totalitarian power, by employing his guiltless tactics of abusive manipulation on the vulnerable. We soon discover that many of the film’s plot activities and the consequences derived from them are driven by Hempf’s desire to possess one of his targeted sexual interests, the lone female character in the film, Christa-Maria Sieland.

Von Donnersmarck provides a mise-en-scene in the theatre that is both creative and concise as it serves several key purposes in the film. First, the point of view is seen from above, corresponding with the translation from its French origins, “surveillance” which means quite literally, “seeing from above.” This places the movie schematically within the surveillance film genre. It is also in this scene that we are introduced not only to a majority of the characters in the film, but also to their salient characteristics. From their balcony box, Grubitz specifically points out both Minister Hempf and Georg Dreyman to Wiesler, explaining Hempf’s political power by saying, “He used to be in State Security. He really cleaned up the theatre scene.” We learn from the playbill that the production is entitled, “Gesichter der Liebe” /“Faces of Love,” written by Sieland’s lover, Georg Dreyman. Up until this point in time, Dreyman has been seen by Grubitz as being beyond reproach by the Stasi, for the lack of subversive material in his work. He emphasizes Dreyman’s presumed loyalty to the State by telling Wiesler that Dreyman “is the only non-subversive writer who is also read in the West” — a rather unusual compliment coming from someone who is supposed to be loyal to the ideals of East Germany’s Socialist system.

But it is from Wiesler’s point of view through his opera glasses that we visually sweep the area from above. Layer upon layer is peeled back to reveal the complex strata of surveillance and those being watched. The process begins with watching Christa-Maria acting
on the stage, and then moves down to the audience, where we are allowed to briefly observe the porcine Minister Hempf engaged in some nervous activity. He is fuelled it seems, by watching Christa-Maria onstage, and the appearance of him fanning himself with his play programme, is unpleasantly like the motions of masturbation. Seated next to him is a guard or aide who continually swivels his head to see if anyone is watching them. Through Wiesler’s surveillant gaze we also observe Dreyman as he openly enjoys watching his own play, basking in the applause of the audience, and receiving the hand-shake of admiration from his friend and writer Paul Hauser, who we come to discover, is considered to be a more “subversive type.” The final tribute we see Dreyman enjoy comes from the loving adoration of Christa-Maria as she rushes to hug and kiss him immediately after leaving the stage.

Dreyman is the only character in the film to receive nothing but positive reinforcement from everyone around him, which almost seems to be why his future trouble begins.

Wiesler’s reaction to this outpouring of genuine love is an intuitive assignation of guilt to Dreyman, by way of a surprising proclamation to Grubitz that Dreyman seems “arrogant.” Wiesler senses that there is something which he cannot really define or name, as he refers to Dreyman as being “arrogant, the kind I warn my students about,” and that he warrants “a closer look,” meaning he should be under Stasi surveillance. In other words, he passes judgement on Dreyman without thinking, perhaps based on his assimilated experience from the past, or simply out of habit. We are not expressly told but it appears that he uses his intuitive reaction to guide him, possibly originating from deeply buried ulterior motives that even he is unaware of.

At first Grubitz reacts to Wiesler’s condemnation of Dreyman by clucking in the writer’s defence, claiming that he has always been supportive of the GDR and that all of Wiesler’s teaching must have dulled his “intuition.” Minutes later, however, when he completes his original mission, which was to appear before Minister Hempf as a dutiful servant, he thinks better of this. Grubitz is clever enough to sense that Hempf wanted
Dreyman to be monitored, and although the Minister’s reasons are not yet completely clear to the ever-scheming Grubitz, he knows the reasons why are not necessary for him to know at this point, however being agreeable to Hempf is always in his best interest. For him, making use of Wiesler’s keen intuition to further his own gains is as good a tool as any, and there is certainly no personal gain (and therefore no need) for mentioning to Hempf that Wiesler originated the idea. Joining Minister Hempf in the seat next to him, Grubitz introduces himself to Hempf and refers to himself as being “the party’s shield and sword” when it comes to defending Socialism’s ideology from “subversive creative types.” When Hempf asks Grubitz’ opinion of Dreyman, he pauses, gauges his timing and says haltingly, “Maybe.” We know that Grubitz is well aware of Wiesler’s intellectual superiority, and so it seems entirely plausible when we hear him repeating Wiesler’s suggestion to Minister Hempf that, “Maybe Dreyman is not as clean as he looks.” Hempf seizes the moment to compliment Grubitz, and then order the surveillance to be carried out before a party he somehow knows that Dreyman is going to be hosting in his apartment.

Grubitz and Wiesler watch the audience as much as they do the play and in this way we also become introduced to other characters in the film.
Grubitz introduces himself to Minister Hempf as “the party’s shield and sword,” and then quickly surmises a way to ingratiate himself to Hempf (suggesting that Georg Dreyman might be a good candidate for surveillance by the Stasi), in the hopes of advancing his career, regardless of how his actions might impact Georg and Christa-Maria in the process.

I propose that what Wiesler detects emanating from Georg Dreyman is not true arrogance. Instead, what he senses is a kind of “dishonesty” lurking underneath the false cover of arrogance. Dreyman’s form of dishonesty is not dishonesty in terms of the system or the State, or towards his lover, but rather, with himself. Georg Dreyman demonstrates a different manifestation of the same loyalty to the ideals of Socialism that Wiesler has, but his passion is manifested in the plays and articles that he writes, in his compassion for his friends and the romantic love that he shares with Christa-Maria. Because so far Dreyman has had none of the hideous experiences that many of his friends have had, he carries the confidence of the uninitiated. He has picked up the habit, albeit unintentionally, of automatically saving his own skin, perhaps by being forever the “nice guy.” His dishonesty, therefore, is located in his weakness for attempting to compromise his work just enough to appease everyone; his
friends, those within “Party Circles,” and finally, his lover, Christa Maria. Wiesler detects in Dreyman that which he abhors and tries to deny within himself, the withering of his own convictions. At this point however, neither one is remotely aware of this or their commonality in sharing it.

Wiesler has only his intellectual convictions, the depth of his professionalism in his work. His “passions” have no other outlet than fuelling his perfectionism in his work-related tasks. It appears as though both Wiesler and Dreyman have been satisfied with their lives just as they are, right up until the point in time where their lives artificially converge through the imposition of Stasi surveillance. This convergence causes the “rupture” that sets in motion some of the key features of Arendt’s theory of action, which she connects most closely to “natality,” meaning the possibility that each birth expresses the “startling unexpectedness of new beginnings.” According to Arendt, “the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected of him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (HC: 177-178).

**Action and Natality, Beginning at Georg Dreyman’s Birthday Party**

The action of surveillance had begun in earnest on the night of Dreyman’s fortieth birthday party, with the equipment having been installed earlier that day. During the twenty-minute installation, Dreyman’s neighbour, Frau Meineke spies on the Stasi agents from the peephole in her door. She is discovered by Wiesler who threatens to remove her daughter Masha, (whose first name he eerily knows) from her place at the university if she exposes the operation. When she complies, cowering in fright, he tells another agent to make sure he sends her a gift for her “cooperation.” This is Wiesler at his worst.

That night, when Dreyman asks Mrs. Meineke to conspire with him in his ruse to prove to Christa- Maria that he can tie a neck-tie, we see how charming he truly is. Frau

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75 “In Party Circles” is how Minister Hempf refers to his political cohorts on the Central Committee in the GDR government.
Meineke, looking quite frightened, ties his tie perfectly, and when he asks her in a whispered voice, “You can keep a secret, can’t you?” Wiesler’s face, as he listens in to Dreyman’s voice, almost seems to wince. At this point, we do not know if it is in annoyance at her presence and the potential threat of being found out, or if it is his first pang of guilt, for putting an innocent in harm’s way.

The birthday party, like the scene in the theatre, introduces us to the secondary characters and furthers our understanding about the primary three. Here we find a small community of creative people, whose warmth and familiarity with each other seems almost protective against the often hostile political environment that surrounds them. This feeling of community is registered in Dreyman’s reaction to the quirky yet sincere birthday gifts that he receives from his group of friends — he is almost moved to tears with gratitude. It is also at this party that Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert) gives Dreyman the fateful musical score that will drive Wiesler to action. Dreyman’s friend, Paul Hauser (Hans Uwe-Bauer), is shown as a writer who refuses to conform and whose anger at Dreyman for being so idealistic is such that he accuses him of almost becoming a “bigwig” himself. During the party he dramatically threatens to cut off their friendship if he does not act like a human being and take some action against the “informers and conformists” who have ruined artists lives, like Jerska’s. He shouts passionately at Dreyman before leaving the party early, “If you don’t take a stand, then you are not human!”

We see Jerska at the party sitting alone (at his own choosing) reading a book. When questioned by Dreyman, he admits that, yes, he has been reading but then he says good naturedly, “Well it is Brecht,” as if it is an inside joke between the two, which denotes a familiarity that Wiesler appears to find utterly foreign when he hears its tone. The birthday gift that Jerska gives Dreyman is sheet music for the piano, entitled, “Sonata for a Good Man.” Listening to all of this and taking it in with growing fascination is Wiesler, who jots down Brecht’s name for further reading on his own. He also listens to the tender and familiar
way that Dreyman and Sieland speak to each other, and when they make love. Meanwhile, we have also been made privy to Christa-Maria sneaking a pill from her coat pocket and then swallowing it in such a way that we know this is not normal prescribed medicine.

After the birthday party, there is a scene of Wiesler at home showing in contrast, his solitary, vacant and loveless life, his spare apartment, and even his spaghetti sauce pathetically squeezed from a tube. We are reminded later of this when he is compelled to hire a prostitute for comfort and companionship, but she left so quickly after their sex act that it only heightened his (and our) awareness of how empty his life is. The contrast between his life and the two people he is surveilling is such that his curiosity about their personal lives is piqued, compelling him to enter their apartment, voyeuristically look at and fondle their belongings wistfully, and even steal the book by Brecht that Jerska had been reading.

Listening to the birthday party also makes Wiesler wonder what Jerska has done that is so terrible that Minister Hempf had him blacklisted for ten years. When we see him looking through Jerska’s file soon after at work, he is joined by Grubitz, who also informs him that the licence plate number Wiesler had reported from a car that had dropped Christa-Maria off earlier in the week, actually belonged to Minister Hempf. As the two of them walk towards a lunch table in the commissary, Wiesler moves to sit down at a table amongst the lower level agents. Grubitz reminds him that the “bosses” sit elsewhere. Wiesler, obviously annoyed at the discovery of Hempf and Sieland’s (forced) relationship, snaps at Grubitz, “Socialism has to begin somewhere” and sits down. Grubitz reasons, “So we’re helping a committee member get a rival out of the way,” but Wiesler counters primly, “Is this why we joined the party?” It is his disapproval that causes him to reveal “the bitter truth” to Dreyman.

From the beginning, Wiesler’s character is defined very much by his intense repression of feelings, and, through his outward expression, he never wavers in his convictions. Some of the best acting in the film comes from the late actor Ulrich Mühe who plays Wiesler, a master of the art of employing surveillance and interrogation techniques.
Mühe’s portrayal shows Wiesler working hard at trying not to display his feelings of contempt for these men when their behaviour and words are ironically quite the opposite of the Socialist ideals they are supposed to be upholding; they disgust him. By keeping his face as impassive as possible in their presence, only the look in his eyes (easily detected by the audience) betrays his true feelings, should any of his fellow agents become less interested in their own gains long enough to notice. The audience begins to detect the difference in Wiesler’s eyes however, when he is shown listening to Dreyman play “Sonata for a Good Man” on the piano after hearing about Dreyman’s suicide. Ironically, both Wiesler and Dreyman hear the news together—by telephone, with Wiesler monitoring the line, when Dreyman receives the call.

**Red Ink, the Blood of Subversives and Bureaucrats.**

In the context of Dreyman’s plan to write a “subversive” article on suicide statistics after Jerska’s suicide, we also find Wiesler coming close to returning to his previous ways. Dreyman and his friends plan to gather at Dreyman’s apartment to discuss the article, because he thinks that he is one of the few among them who is somehow not under Stasi surveillance. His friends, especially Paul Hauser, are not convinced that this is true, and so they devise a plan to determine the presence of surveillance by using Paul’s Uncle Frank, who visits from the West every Sunday as a decoy. They discuss a false plan with the Uncle about smuggling his nephew Paul over the border, naming the particular crossing point as bait.

If they were heard by any agent other than Wiesler, they would surely be reported and Uncle Frank would be stopped at the border and searched. Of course Paul would not be in the car, but the Uncle in any case would ring Dreyman afterwards to report whether or not he had been stopped and searched, determining whether or not anyone had heard them make the plan. In his protective mode, Wiesler begins to ring the border guard after hearing the plans, but then stops himself from speaking into the telephone. He has taken another unexpected action,
but once again, says aloud only to himself, “Just this once my friend,” as if to reassure himself that there is still a way for him to return to his old ways if he decides to.

Once Paul’s Uncle crosses the border without a problem, he rings Dreyman and reassures him that everything went ahead as planned, and that there was after all, “no real danger anyway.” Wiesler, who listens in on every phone conversation, misinterprets this as meaning that Paul Hauser has safely made it across the border, only because Wiesler did not alert the border guards. After hanging up, Dreyman, who is somewhat drunk, seems almost ashamed at the obvious ineptitude of the Stasi border police. He yells at the ceiling in an incredulous voice, “Who would’ve thought that our State Security was so incompetent? Who’d have thought they were such idiots!” Wiesler appears insulted and stung by these remarks, but again says to no one, “Just you wait.” He simply types in his report, “No further noteworthy incidents.”

In the next scene, the editor of the West German magazine Der Spiegel arrives from West Berlin to discuss the article and to present Georg with a special typewriter for writing the article. Because every single typewriter in East Germany is registered, they must find an unregistered model for Georg to prevent the article being traced to him, should the original ever be seized. Only a red typewriter ribbon can be found for this model, an ink colour that might serve many purposes for the film in that it may symbolise the life-blood of creativity, bloody consequences should he be caught, or possible evidence for the redemptive ending of the film. The editor warns them of the dire consequences of anyone finding the typewriter. Hauser and Dreyman find the man slightly off putting, a subtlety that von Donnersmarck uses to explain the culturally dichotomous relationship between East and West Germany. Although it seems that the population of the East long to have the freedom to travel and publish in the West, they still take an almost snobbish pride in being East Berliners. The editor from the West, who brings them “real beer” and fancy cake, represents a decadent, easy life that the
Soviet influenced East German both desire and eschew. The editor also tries to get Dreyman to politicise the article, but Georg prefers to write it from a literary point of view, and says so. Once the formalities, instructions and warnings are over with, the editor, in celebration of their partnership, pops a champagne cork, which hits a light switch and causes a painful feedback in Wiesler’s surveillance headphones. Already irritated by this, he is pushed over the edge it seems, by the editor’s toast: “To you! To letting all of Germany see the true face of the GDR!”

It is obvious that Wiesler, who is the very personification of an East Berliner, thinks that this is going too far, and has decided that he will turn Dreyman and his friends in to Grubitz. In the next scene we see Wiesler, with a determined look on his face and his report in hand, marching down a hallway past a protesting secretary where he finally barges into Grubitz’ office. He is waved in by Grubitz, who is talking on the phone, busily threatening to shut down a church. Before Wiesler can turn in his report, however, Grubitz wants to enter into a cheery discussion about prison treatments for subversive artists contained in a dissertation written by one of his own PhD students.

First, he explains that although the paper is top rate, he will only be giving the student a “B” grade, in order to impress upon the student that getting an “A” from Grubitz is not so easy. While admitting proudly that the student is an extraordinary scholar, Grubitz has no intention of giving due credit to the student, and will most likely claim the ideas as his own — again, his idea of a compliment to his student — who of course will never be told about it. Just as Georges in *Caché* refuses to recognise Majid or his son, Grubitz refuses to give recognition to his students or to Wiesler. It is as if by denying the recognition of others, the men can somehow protect their own existence. Grubitz then describes to Wiesler in some detail the categories of artists and the corresponding methods of breaking their resistance, chuckling the whole way through. Referring to Dreyman in particular, he says: “No human contact the whole time, even with the guard. Good treatment, no abuse, no harassment, no
scandals, nothing they could write about later.” Wiesler, seeing where the discussion is going, hides his own report in his lap. Grubitz gaily continues the description of treatment, which amounts to isolating the artist completely and then releasing him after about ten months. He refers to Dreyman as a “Type 4,” the type who always needs his friends around him. Finally, he describes in chilling detail the eventual outcome of this treatment: “Know what the best part is? Most Type 4’s we have processed in this way never write anything again! Or paint, or anything, or whatever artists do.” It now appears to Wiesler that as he laughs aloud, nothing pleases Grubitz (who is after all, the Head of the Department of Culture) more than the thought of crushing the creativity out of someone like Dreyman, just so that he will never write another word — in other words, never again be recognised. Grubitz finishes, “And that, without any use of force- just like that! Kind of like a present.”

His reaction to Grubitz’s ruthlessness is to change his mind about informing on Dreyman and his friends, because by now, although tempted to return to his previous unquestioning duty to the State, Wiesler has gained the insight necessary to be able to judge on his own and do otherwise. When he conceals the damaging documentation that would have destroyed Dreyman, we are once again given a glimpse of who is “ruthless” and who is not. The small act of crumpling up the report and hiding it from Grubitz is tantamount to saving Dreyman’s life. But even more memorable in this act is the way in which Wiesler has put his own life, quite literally on the line, for someone with whom he has not exchanged one single word.

**Conclusion: Forgiveness and Redemption**

How does one explain Grubitz’ guileful mirth at the thought of destroying the creative spark in his fellow man as opposed to Wiesler’s emerging conscience? The ruthlessness meted out to its citizens by the East German government may have been born of the experience of totalitarianism, which in the form of Stalinism and Nazism had annihilated
acceptable codes of conduct, customary standards of moral judgement, and the traditional categories of political thought. Arendt’s view of modernity was shaped by the heinous events of the Gulag and the Holocaust, both of them brutal and unredeeming, and of course, these are the same events that shaped the foundation of East Germany’s totalitarian regime. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt claimed that after the institutionalisation of terror and violence, the phenomenon of totalitarianism had ruptured and drained of all meaning the bulk of traditional moral and political categories. But the result of this “break” from tradition should not be taken to mean the hopeless loss of any redemption. Arendt felt that by identifying the moments of these breaks in history, one could establish a proper perspective that relates to whatever the present time holds. Through our imagination we are able to learn from history rather than repeat it.

When Wiesler listens to Dreyman play *Sonata for a Good Man*, and when he hears the conversations between the subjects who are under his surveillance, his imagination is sparked. What happens next is the emergence of his self-awareness in contrast to the corrupt and draconian tactics of his comrades. This is followed by the realisation of how empty and lonely his own life has become by merely following the rules as opposed to what he thought were their guiding principals, set out by the East German regime. Redemption for Wiesler follows but only because and only after he has undertaken the unsavoury act of the surveillance of others ordered by the State. Forgiveness for his previous acts of institutionalised terrorism against his fellow man comes in the form of having a book dedicated to him by one of his potential victims, the rescued victim, Georg Dreyman — the only example of someone Wiesler has actually saved.

When Minister Hempf tires of “wooing” the consistently disenchanted Christa-Maria, he has her arrested for illegally purchasing drugs and then subsequently detained for interrogation in order to glean information from her about Dreyman’s “subversive” activities. Because he is forced to give up on Christa-Maria as a willing romantic partner, Hempf is
determined to gain satisfaction another way by destroying the relationship she has with her lover. Hempf puts Grubitz in charge of the interrogation and, as he is growing suspicious of Wiesler’s inability to find anything wrong with Dreyman’s activities, he seizes the opportunity to “test” Wiesler’s loyalty by assigning him as Christa-Maria’s interrogator.

By this time point Wiesler’s full attention has become focussed on protecting Christa-Maria and Dreyman and on covering his own tracks while doing so. When Wiesler is begins to interrogate Christa-Maria, he starts with his back turned to her. He does this because he now understands that in their particular case, to be recognised in this system is to be doomed. With Christa-Maria at one end of the interrogation table and himself at the other, he slowly turns around to face her, allowing her the chance to hide her expression and thus feign her lack of recognition of him. For the moment, he successfully manages to prevent Christa-Maria from going to prison, but in the end, cannot save her from herself, as she quite easily gives up the hiding place of the typewriter that Dreyman is using to write the subversive article.

What this shows is that the act of surveillance can reveal many things but certainly not all, and especially not always in the correct context. Christa-Maria, who was after all somewhat drug-addled, never had the clarity of vision and imagination to attain the proper perspective that Arendt believes is necessary to create the proper distance for impartial judgement. Rather, Christa-Maria is a victim of the irreversibility of the boundlessness and unpredictability that are the by-products of action. After the interrogation, Christa-Maria is released and told by Grubitz that she is now a member of the Stasi because she is considered to be an informant and her reward for this is to have her supply of illegal drugs returned to her. Meanwhile, Wiesler has raced back to Dreyman’s apartment and removed the typewriter only moments before Grubitz and his men appear back on the scene to search the place and “find” it hidden under the floorboards. Christa-Maria, who is in the shower when the Stasi agents arrive, emerges to find Grubitz and his men about to pry open the floorboards. At this time Dreyman gives Christa-Maria a look that conveys disbelief, betrayal and contempt all at once,
so that when she receives the look, the sheer power of it drives her out of the apartment and into the street before she has a chance to see that the typewriter has already been removed.

When a guilt-ridden Christa-Maria walks in front of a truck (deliberately, it seems), it is Wiesler who arrives at her side first, reassuring her that she has done no harm to Dreyman by revealing where the typewriter was hidden. Oddly, it is as if Dreyman writing about suicide has somehow produced another suicide as an inadvertent result. Wiesler takes it upon himself to offer her forgiveness in that she may forgive herself before she dies. He had once again, as in the first time when he caused the doorbell to ring, taken the decisive action to remove the typewriter to prevent Dreyman from going to prison. And just as before, the consequences of this action within “this web of already existing human relationships” 76 were not at all what he had expected.

When Dreyman finally arrives at Christa-Maria’s nearly lifeless body, he picks her up, and cradling her broken and bleeding body against his own, he weeps repeatedly, “Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me,” until she dies in his arms. This is the first in what seems like a set of potential endings that von Donnersmarck presents in the final moments of the film. What has Dreyman done that compels him to seek forgiveness? We may derive an answer from an earlier exchange between Dreyman and his subversive cohorts, when they advised Dreyman to keep Christa-Maria uninformed about their plans to write the Der Spiegel article. Dreyman, who seems to seek the transparent ideal whenever possible, has not understood her fragility (or weakness) as well as his friends seemed to. Now that he sees the terrible outcome of his and her own actions, he realises (assumes) that it is his thoughtlessness that has caused her death.

Of course Wiesler is coming to the same realisation — that all the interference and attempts to steer fate, in other words, his “thoughtfulness” — actually caused the unpredictable and the very opposite outcome that he had wished for. Interestingly, although

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76 HC: 184.
both Dreyman and Wiesler share the street scene where Christa-Maria has been killed, neither men exchange words, now, or ever in the film. Because of their wordlessness, both Wiesler and Dreyman become the “lonely figures” Arendt describes, and both live unhappily for years under the weight of the unintentional and irreversible consequences they have triggered. Finally, the spell of this unhappiness is broken for both men in the film’s ending, not through words spoken but through printed words that are written and read by both men; the words written by Wiesler in his report protecting Dreyman and his friends, and in the book Dreyman has written after reading the report. Dreyman was so inspired by Wiesler’s actions that he dedicates his book to Wiesler, which Wiesler reads at the closing of the final scene.

In *The Human Condition*, the chapter entitled, “Action” holds a section called, “Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive” (236). In it, Arendt explains “the case of action and action’s predicaments:”

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to do what one has done though one did not: and could not: have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving. . . .Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover, we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. (HC: 237)

We see that some years later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when Dreyman fortuitously runs into Hempf (who is no longer Minister of anything) at a theatre where a “new” and slightly more Western version of “Gesichter der Liebe” /“Faces of Love,” is being performed. We had last seen the play with Christa-Maria as the lead; this time however, the lead is being played by a black woman. Both Hempf and Dreyman encounter each other in the lobby because both had left their seats (coincidentally) during a scene that reminded them of Christa-Maria. Hempf now delights in mocking Dreyman for no longer writing after the fall of the Wall, but more importantly, Dreyman also learns from Hempf that he had been
under continual surveillance by the Stasi after all. This revelation piques his curiosity so that he goes home and performs a reverse “surgery” of the surveillance wiring removal.

Incredulous at the amount of hidden equipment and wiring he finds, he is compelled to visit the former Stasi headquarters, where the surveillance dossiers pertaining to the private lives of an enormous percentage of the (previously) spied upon East German citizenry are held. Dreyman wants to see what others have seen of him. The amount of material written about him in his file is piled high enough to both surprise Dreyman and even impresses the worker who brings it out to him. The final page of Dreyman’s dossier contains the telling trace of the surveillant, a red-inked finger-print and some initials. Luckily, in the newly restored Berlin, access to the name of their persecutor is relatively easy. But in Dreyman’s case, he realises that his persecutor is actually his saviour, or at least he tried to be, and he sets out to find him.

When Dreyman locates Wiesler, he stands off in the distance, surveilling him as it were, and decides not to contact him face to face, most likely because Wiesler now holds a low level position as a postman, perhaps considered to be demeaning and embarrassing to Dreyman who ironically decides to respect Wiesler’s privacy. Now it is Dreyman who is protective of Wiesler’s dignity, because he sees Wiesler as a “good man.” Dreyman, as Hempf had noted in their earlier contemptuous conversation, hadn’t written anything (a personal predicament somewhat foreshadowed by Grubitz’ description of how to destroy an artist’s creativity), since the fall of the Berlin Wall. But now after discovering Wiesler’s act of compassion, he is suddenly inspired to write a novel entitled, Sonata for a Good Man.

The final sequence of Das Leben der Anderen shows Wiesler two years later, reading the fly leaf of the book which is dedicated to him by Dreyman. Here is the forgiveness and redemption that Wiesler, Dreyman, and the audience seek in order to recover from the

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77 This scene is extremely reminiscent of a well known scene in the 1974 film, The Conversation, (American Zoetrope), written and directed by Francis Ford Coppola, in which the main character, Harry Caul an audio-surveillance professional played by Gene Hackman, frantically tears his apartment to shreds looking for audio surveillance wires that he assumes are there.
consequence of Christa-Maria’s untimely death, and perhaps it fulfils a promise that situations in life can eventually work out for the good of someone, (apparently) if one’s heart is in the right place. But beyond forgiveness and redemption is the recognition given to Wiesler by Dreymon, by recognising that Wiesler is the one who “bore witness” to their lives. Arendt also speaks of “promises:” both forgiving and promising also affect the temporality of the world of action. Forgiving supposedly “serves to undo the deeds of the past,” while promising “serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men.”  

We see the possibility of what the future may hold in the “islands of security” set up in the Minority Report, but the promise behind the set up of those islands is false; it is the promise of safety in exchange for glittering totalitarianism. Perspective is gained when John Anderton realises that there is the possibility of an alternative outcome depending on how one chooses and how one chooses to judge. The future really should be an “ocean of uncertainty” rather than a predictable place of “safety.” Conversely, in Caché perspective is denied by Georges Laurent, even when it is patiently laid out before him to take up. When he denies the past, he also denies forgiveness both of himself and by any others as well as foregoing any promises for the future. Gerd Wiesler and Georg Dreyman never meet face to face or speak with each other which is pertinent because not “seeing” everything becomes the link to recognition.

Surveillance serves as the conduit for action and relationships in Das Leben der Anderen, and the action undertaken is unpredictable because Wiesler chooses to use surveillance as a way to protect his subjects rather than reveal them. The more he covers up their activities, the more he seems to reveal about himself to himself. As with the character of Georges in Caché, parts of himself that he had forgotten or had never before comprehended

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are revealed through his action. Unlike Georges, who wanted only to protect himself, cut off any relationships resulting from surveillance and rebury the revelation of his actions, in the case of Gerd Wiesler in *Das Leben der Anderen*, that which is revealed through his protection of others on the basis of a conversion to ethical principles, serves to shed light upon and so advances his humanity.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Georg Dreyman is somewhat astonished to see the large amount of once closely guarded surveillance files (made available to anyone who wishes to read them) that had been kept on him, and reviews them all to find unexpected secrets revealed.

Wiesler becomes a low level postman after the fall of the Berlin Wall.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have attempted to make a contribution to our history of visual culture. In doing so, I have postulated the existence of the surveillance film genre — a special class of film which reflects on our current audiovisual regimes. This audiovisual regime is defined through the manipulation of appearances. Each of these films I have chosen initiates the surveillance point of view as a controlling type of subjectivity. The surveillance film conflates audiovisual culture with audiovisual regime.

I have used Benjamin’s critique of the aura and Arendt’s theory of action to articulate critical perspectives against audiovisual regimes and to show how they are destructive of ‘auratic’ subjectivity, defined as the capacity to ‘bear witness.’ These audiovisual regimes also fail to generate a position of ethical awareness from which a theory of action in Arendt’s sense might emerge. At first glance, the characters in each of the films discussed in this thesis seem to undergo some type of transformation as a result of their involvement in either surveilling or being surveilled. What I have shown however, is that by peeling back the mediated layers of surveillance within each film, what is revealed is how these transformations also reflect the ideological constraints operating on individuals portrayed in the times and places presented.

The ideas of Foucault and Rodowick are also pertinent to my discussion of the surveillance film genre. By tapping into their concepts and engaging in a contemporary critique of visual culture, I have argued that a sense of ethical meaning although applicable, is not always visible within a surveillance society when revealed through the manipulation of digital visual culture. I have shown how the possibilities of what Rodowick referred to as a present-day “desubstantiation” of digital imagery echoes Benjamin’s conceptual loss of aura.
I have mentioned Foucault’s important view on the disappearance of authenticity from the original when it is replaced by similitude. I explored the manifestation of our growing separation from the aura and, as a result of our audiovisual culture, our acceptance of the inauthentic image within our increasingly digital, visual culture. As our distance from the real increases, our experience of viewing becomes increasingly mechanical. These films show how the further disconnected position of surveillance is created and exists within what is fast becoming an audiovisual regime.

What I have argued in this thesis, then, is that the surveillance film and the surveillance film genre must be accompanied by a broader critical reflection on social and cultural themes. Beyond this, however, my aim was to uncover the core of that form of surveillance that operates within our own being, that is, our conscience. In fact, I have endeavoured to examine the possibility of our conscience being the original surveillant in our lives. Perhaps from this vantage point, we can begin to look at how our acceptance of surveillance in our everyday lives should be taken not only from the panoptic viewpoint, but from what may be the most important purview, to look within ourselves.
Filmography


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