Witness Resistance: The Role of Surveillance in Emad Burnat's *Five Broken Cameras* and Michael Haneke's *Caché*

Audrey Mugford

Abstract: This essay synthesizes Michael Haneke's psychological thriller *Caché* (2005) and Emad Burnat's documentary *Five Broken Cameras* (2011) to explore how the act of filmmaking—or "surveilling"—contradicts the constructed colonial narrative of history. Although different in context, subject matter, and genre, both films have colonial subjects using surveillance as a tool for anti-colonial resistance. I briefly discuss the Paris massacre of 1961, followed by France's willful amnesia regarding that atrocity, and the peaceful demonstrations that famously take place in Bil'in against encroaching Israeli settlements on Palestinian land to provide context for *Caché* and *Five Broken Cameras* respectively.

Postcolonial cinema often engages in the politics of resistance against imperial and colonial powers. Surveillance—or filmmaking—offers a mode of resistance; unmediated documentation of colonial violence forces retrospection upon events either excluded or downplayed through dominant colonizer lenses. For this essay's argument, surveillance refers to the filmed documentation of a subject, often while the surveilled person engages in clandestine activities. Both Michael Haneke's film *Caché* (2005) and Emad Burnat's documentary *Five Broken Cameras* (2011) use surveillance to resist complicity, amnesia, and violence—elements notably omitted in films from colonial or neocolonial perspectives, either implicitly or explic-

itly. While *Caché* investigates the complicity of its civilian protagonist, Georges, in the colonial violence perpetrated by France against Franco-Algerians during the 17 October 1961 massacre decades after its occurrence, *Five Broken Cameras* documents ongoing violence of colonial-Israeli armed forces in Bil'in, Palestine as it unfolds in real time. Despite their differences temporally and contextually, both films use the act of surveilling the guilty party to refuse convenient colonial forgetfulness—either in the past or the future—of the violence committed. *Caché* queries the guilt of the settler-colonial bystander through the surveillance tapes Georges receives (although he is comfortable with being filmed when he controls the narrative on his talk show) thus resisting his desire to ignore an unscripted, objective account of his guilt. Both films are an intrinsically meta form of resistance against the colonial narrative and obstruct the colonizer's ability to obscure or rewrite parts of history. *Five Broken Cameras* and *Caché* use film and surveillance as a peaceful form of resistance, which both colonial-Israel and Georges Laurent respectively respond to with paranoia and violence.

Five Broken Cameras and *Caché* require viewers to understand the external context of violence from their respective colonial oppressors. Burnat's *Five Broken Cameras* chronicles the unarmed resistance of his native village Bil'in, located on the West Bank in Palestine, as they protest against encroaching Israeli settlements and land divisions. Over the course of the five-year period that Burnat documents, he uses five different cameras. Israeli armed forces retaliate against his peaceful documentation of Palestinian demonstrations by breaking each of his cameras. As Burnat begins filming in the winter of 2005, his fourth son Gibreel is born. Gibreel's birth coincides with the infancy of an ongoing peaceful resistance in Bil'in, and Burnat uses his camera to document each one's growth and life (Hallward 542). While *Five Broken Cameras* documents resistance in real time through actual footage of Palestinian protest and colonial Israeli response, Haneke's film *Caché* takes place some fifty years after the Paris massacre which catalyzes the film's

plot. On 5 October 1961, French police implemented a racially motivated curfew for French-Algerians in retaliation against the National Liberation Front (FLN) activity in Paris. Twelve days later, on 17 October 1961, the FLN brought approximately 20 000 French-Algerians together in peaceful protest against the curfew. The FLN enforced that all protestors were unarmed and accompanied by family to contradict France's representation of Franco-Algerians as barbaric and aggressive. Despite the protest's peaceful nature, French police arrested 10 000, killed at least 200, and assaulted countless Franco-Algerian demonstrators (Brozgal 2–3). Other than one brief mention of 17 October 1961 from Georges to Anne as he explains his relationship to Majid, the massacre is never explicitly referenced in *Caché* (Haneke 00:59:47); the choice to allude to but not discuss the violent massacre that causes the film's plot imitates France's own amnesia through nonrecognition of its harmful past. *Caché* follows the growing unease of protagonist Georges Laurent and his wife, Anne, as they receive surveillance tapes of their home, unsettling illustrations of a figure coughing up blood, and footage leading to the apartment of Majid, a man Georges has not seen since he was a child. After the massacre of 17 October 1961 left Majid an orphan, Georges's parents planned to adopt him. A six-year-old Georges disrupts this plan by fabricating that Majid is exhibiting symptoms of tuberculosis and reporting that Majid beheads a chicken with the intention of intimidating him. Georges's lies result in the Laurents sending Majid away, ultimately erasing his existence from their family's memory. Burnat's *Five Broken Cameras* and Haneke's *Caché* employ distinctive temporal and cinematic approaches to embody resistance of colonial amnesia through filmmaking. Burnat's visceral documentation of active unarmed resistance from the perspective of Palestinians strives to be a preventative measure against ongoing colonial violence and erasure. The use of surveillance in *Caché* serves as a psychological tool to query complicity and responsibility for participants in settings that appear separate from colonial history.

Each of Burnat's cameras simultaneously docu-

ment violence perpetrated by Israel and capture authentic scene compositions which preserve Bil'in on film through each stage of the Israeli settlements. This documentation resists the settler-colonial goal of replacement and invites the viewer to engage with memories of the pre-settlement Palestinian landscape. After the Second Intifada in Palestine, Israel constructed a wall to separate Israel from the rest of the West Bank. This decision impacted Palestinians by greatly reducing their farmland, destroying their olive trees, and forcing them to take longer routes filled with armed checkpoints in order to get to work, school, or to receive medical care. As Palestinians were subjected to these drastic changes, the popularity of unarmed and localized resistance grew (Darweish and Rigby 71). Burnat's footage visually explicates the juxtaposition between the unarmed, land-connected resistance in Bil'in with the stark outline of Israeli settlements, looming on the outskirts of his village. A gas grenade damages and subsequently breaks Burnat's first camera, demonstrating the colonial apprehension regarding surveillance by the colonized "other" (Burnat 0:15:54). The image becomes increasingly pixelated and eventually cuts, marking the temporary end of Burnat's ability to participate in witness resistance. With his second camera, Burnat pans across the Palestinian-inhabited side of the wall, where goats graze on green grass, over to the contrastive, beige, man-made structures that creep over the natural landscape (0:19:41). The placement of the camera in Bil'in positions Israeli settlements in opposition to the landscape, inviting the viewer to resist through the act of witnessing. Burnat immortalizes this landscape by documenting it—an act that resists the colonial goal of erasure.

Similar to Burnat's refusal to allow Israeli settlements to build over and then forget Bil'in, the surveillance footage Georges receives in *Caché* unearths his forgotten complicity and benefits from France's violent colonial history with Algeria. Despite the deaths of between 800 000 and 1.5 million Algerians over its duration, "it is only recently that France has officially recognized the [Algerian] war, [as it] has not always been forthcoming about the torture

committed by the French" (McFadden 114). With *Caché* as a fictional narrative, its representation of unscripted surveillance as aiding in resistance settler-colonial amnesia and complicity crops up in the varied reactions Georges has regarding the various contexts in which he is filmed. While Georges is comfortable performing for the camera on his literary talk show, his reaction to the unknown surveillance suggests his unease at the prospect of losing the ability to properly script himself. The staged and sterile environment of Georges's talk show set—which consists of shelves of fake, titleless books—contrasts with that of his home dining room; while both scenes are blocked in similar ways, his home exists as an intimate, dimly lit space lined with actual books, suggesting that Georges's talk show persona is a carefully curated imprint of his actual self (Haneke 0:12:18; 0:08:08). The act of surveillance forces Georges to confront his true self, resisting the colonial separation between representation and reality, and shifting the spotlight away from the presentation Georges promotes and towards the guilt he desires to forget. After Majid's suicide, Georges retreats into his bedroom where he takes sleeping pills—"cachets" in French, homonymous to the film's title (Ezra and Sillars 220)—and draws the curtains, as he attempts to return to his amnesiac stasis (Haneke 1:48:30–1:50:40). Instead of expressing distress or reflecting on his contribution to Majid's death, Georges seems to appear relieved that the witness to his guilt no longer can hold him accountable, allowing him to return to his metaphorical hibernation. Cybelle McFadden stipulates that "perhaps Georges is more guilty for his continual lack of recognition as an adult of the harm he provoked as a child than the six-year-old Georges" (120). While the culpability of a six-year-old in the greater framework of France's colonial destruction is ambiguous, Georges's choice in adulthood to continually ignore his privilege and complicity becomes his actual fault. With Majid's death, the surveillance tapes cease. Georges is no longer forced to consider the benefits he received from his part—and that of his country—in the colonization of Algeria. Instead of confronting his own contribution to Majid's suicide, Georg-

es returns to bed and chooses to metaphorically hibernate through his guilt or any interrogation. This decision mimics the Laurents, who chose to erase Majid from their memory after giving him up in the 1960s; the French police, who sealed the archives documenting the massacre of 17 October 1961 for 50 years (Brozgal 3); and France's overall refusal turned hesitation to acknowledge the colonization of Algeria.

The intense apprehension to have an uncontrolled source in the role of documenter by both Georges and colonial-Israelis suggests that the documentation itself threatens the colonial agenda. The surveillance of settler-colonial acts by Burnat in *Five Broken Cameras*, which is met by disproportionate and often violent acts of retaliation by colonial Israel, indicate that unscripted documentation inherently contradicts and resists colonial narratives that underplay or obscure the truth of colonial violence. Many of the settler-colonial Israelis who Burnat surveils on Bil'in land express a similar discomfort and anger to Georges's in *Caché*. One Israeli man exclaims "Stop filming!" at Burnat, and then attempts to obscure his camera lens (0:38:31). Although each film makes use of surveillance to draw attention to past and present instances of violence, it is important to note that *Five Broken Cameras* achieves this through the act of filming whereas Georges in *Caché* confronts his surveillance after the filming has already taken place. The temporal distinction between *Caché*, in which surveillance tapes by their subject are viewed after their creation, and *Five Broken Cameras*, where Israeli forces react to Burnat's active surveilling, situates Burnat in the throes of resistance, and the person filming Georges as continuing resistance in a postcolonial setting. *Caché* thus retrospectively revisits colonial France's narrative of history, whereas *Five Broken Cameras* aims to resist it ever being written in the first place.

Through unauthorized surveillance, *Caché* and *Five Broken Cameras* appropriate tools of the dominant colonial power to engage in what Bill Ashcroft describes as "transformative resistance" (19). In his book Post-Colonial Trans-

formation (2001), Ashcroft compares Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú's approach to resistance, where she appropriated and transformed colonial culture for the purpose of decolonization with her father's complete and combative rejection of colonial culture. Menchú's approach results in a subtle form of resistance that becomes harder to stifle than the polar opposition opted for by people like her father (18–19). In *Caché*, the surveillance imposed upon Georges and his family replicates one of the means of oppression used by the French government upon Algerians living in France during the 1960s: "the French, as Algerian migrants came to France, imported surveillance techniques from their colony to the metropolis, techniques aimed at these very 'foreigners'" (Watson 126). Although Haneke never explicitly reveals the person responsible for the surveillance tapes, the tapes invert and transform what France did to Algerian civilians, exposing its harm "with the presumption that the Algerians are now watching their former watchers" (126). Burnat's visceral documentary style in *Five Broken Cameras* uses surveillance in the present against the colonial perpetrator, making his film a real time employment of transformative resistance. The film's Oscar nomination following its release not only meant that the mode of its creation appropriated the colonial tool of surveillance, but also that Burnat's story of resistance in Bil'in had reached a global platform. This nomination was followed by Burnat and his family's detainment in LAX after border security did not believe the purpose of his visit. Only after American film director Michael Moore stepped in was Burnat released, even though border security had already seen proof of Burnat's Oscars invitation (Schuessler 1). This disbelief by American border security of Burnat's Oscar nomination—until verified by an American—seems to embody the assumption that such spaces are reserved for dominant voices. Burnat, as perceived by dominant neocolonial America and Western society, intrudes upon this space through his filmmaking and critical acclaim.

Although *Caché* and *Five Broken Cameras* both employ transformative resistance through surveillance, each

film differs in the desired function of their respective surveillance. The former exposes the psychological guilt of a complicit man who denies any culpability for the consequences of his actions as a child, and the latter exposes the ongoing and blatant colonial violence of Israel. In this way, *Caché* and *Five Broken Cameras* diverge in their objective for how surveillance resists. The unknown filmer makes it their goal to cause psychological unrest and stoke unresolved guilt by sending Georges the surveillance tapes. Georges is only made aware of his surveillance after it occurs, while Burnat openly films in situations which directly place his safety at risk. *Caché* thus resists a psychological amnesia that has already occurred by bringing forth questions of culpability years after Georges or France actively engaged in harmful acts. *Caché* explores how to resist France's inclination in postcolonial society to ignore the history of their oppression of Algerians. As France has been somewhat successful in forgetting, the level of responsibility that the average white French civilian like Georges, who benefits from but has a degree of separation from the actual violence, remains. In *Five Broken Cameras*, however, Burnat films active violence openly. Burnat's documentary exposes colonial hypocrisy as it unfolds. By documenting active colonialism, Burnat provides a clear example of what is occurring on the West Bank and implicates the viewer in participating in his resistance.

Analyzing the use of surveillance in *Caché* and *Five Broken Cameras* demonstrates one of the many different modes which colonial and postcolonial resistance can take. While psychological and physical violence followed by amnesia or a rewriting of history tend to be the trajectory of the colonial agenda, postcolonial cinema can resist this by using surveillance to force reflection on the colonizer's culpability. The transformative resistance argued for by Ashcroft manifests in the use of film and surveillance; film, a traditionally colonial medium, is used to disrupt the colonial agenda. In the comparison of these two films, the use of surveillance as resistance presents in different styles. *Caché* resists the notion that the France of today bears no culpability—or can

forget their culpability—in the Algerian War and the 17 October 1961 massacre by exposing Georges's discomfort as his actions are surveilled. *Five Broken Cameras* uses surveillance to expose the brutality of Israeli colonialism on a global stage to achieve support for the plight of Bil'in. As both Haneke and Burnet expose the colonial beneficiary and colonizing power's paranoid, violent response to their subject's peaceful surveillance of their actions, they expose how colonialism thrives when no objective recording exists. Little physical action is taken by the surveyors in either film: in *Caché*, Haneke leaves their identity ambiguous, and Burnat films rather than actively protests. The disproportionate violent reaction of the filmed colonial perpetrator implies their guilt more than the action of the subjugated persons.

Works Cited

Ashcroft, Bill. *Post-Colonial Transformation.* Routledge, 2001.

Brozgal, Lia "Introduction: The Scene of the Crime, The Crime of the Seen." *Absent the Archive: Cultural Traces of a Massacre in Paris,* 17 October 1961, Liverpool UP, 2020, pp. 1–30.

Five Broken Cameras. Directed by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, Alegria Productions, 2011, *Kanopy*.

Darweish, Marwan, and Andrew Rigby. "THE RESURGENCE OF POPULAR RESISTANCE: 2002–13." *Popular Protest in Palestine: The Uncertain Future of Unarmed Resistance,* Pluto Press, 2015, pp. 71–95, JSTOR.

Ezra, Elizabeth, and Jane Sillars. "Hidden in Plain Sight: Bringing Terror Home." Screen (*London*), vol. 48, no. 2, 2007, pp. 215–221.

Hallward, Maia Carter. "Creative Responses to Separation: Israeli and Palestinian Joint Activism in Bil'in." *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 46, no. 4, KSU Press, 2009, pp. 467–608.

Caché. Directed by Michael Haneke, Sony Pictures Classics, 2005, *Kanopy*. Schuessler, Jennifer. "Oscars-Bound Palestinian is Held in Los Angeles." *New York Times.* 21 February 2013, p. 1.

Watson, Juliana Blair. "What About Majid? Circuits of Violence and hyper-visibility in Michael Haneke's *Caché*/*Hidden*." *French Screen Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, Routledge, 2020, pp. 125–139.