Caught on Tape?: The Politics of Video in the New Torture Film

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CHAPTER FOUR

Caught on Tape?
*The Politics of Video in the New Torture Film*

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By now, it can hardly have escaped attention that surveillance, primarily visual surveillance, has become a frequent contemporary narrative figuration. Films in the action-suspense and horror genres in particular rather hyperbolically highlight the thematic concerns of a surveillance culture; slightly less obviously, they demonstrate the relations between political formations, subjects, and technologies that characterize much current thought on surveillance in a variety of fields. Most recently emerging in the United States are such films as *Vacancy* (Nimród Antal, 2007), *Vantage Point* (Pete Travis, 2008), *Untraceable* (Gregory Hoblit, 2008), *Look* (Adam Rifkin, 2007), *Deja Vu* (Tony Scott, 2006), *Eagle Eye* (D. J. Caruso, 2008), and, in a slightly different tradition, *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *Diary of the Dead* (George Romero, 2007), *Quarantine* (John Eric Dowdle, 2008), and *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007).\(^1\) All these films, in one way or another, situate surveillance as the central theme or as the primary structuring element of the narrative, and thus demand a degree of attention to the specific ways in which an increasingly diversified surveillance culture is structuring cinematic narrative, and, perhaps more centrally, how narrative formations serve to consolidate the stakes of surveillance technologies and practices.\(^2\)

My focus in this essay is the manner in which these surveillance narratives are coincident with our most recently dubbed horror subgenre: "torture porn." As common as the surveillance film, and frequently overlapping, are those romps through sadomasochism best represented by the *Hostel* (2005–2007) and *Saw* (2004–2010) film series, with a number of other notable examples prompting widespread critical disgust. But rather than simply noting that the intersection of torture and surveillance is a relatively straightforward symptom of the current political zeitgeist, my concern is to explore the way video technologies are being deployed in these narratives, and how the resulting
narrative formations might allow us to think through the relations between surveillance and torture with greater specificity. In doing so, I will show how what might seem to be the almost insistently apolitical torture narratives of the Saw series function in a contiguous relationship to the more focused critiques of a European corollary: the cinematic meditations on video surveillance of the director Michael Haneke. Haneke’s Caché (2005) and Benny’s Video (1992) serve to refocus the willfully ahistorical morality discourses of some of the American torture films into a compelling exploration of the relations between graphic cinematic violence and the production of racial subjects in western European postcolonial surveillance cultures. The contingencies between the American and European films, based on both violence and surveillance, are not just instructive for an understanding of contemporary narrative formations, but also serve to demonstrate the structural politics of surveillance technologies and practices that are both highly coded and historically specific.

The phenomenon of torture porn is widely considered the lowest common denominator in the global reinvestment in horror in the new millennium. The ultra-graphic violence of these films, in combination with narratives that seem predominantly invested in providing the basis for incredibly drawn-out scenes of torture—rather than the rhythmic suspense of a more “traditional” slasher film or the eerie uncanniness of the contemporary Asian or Spanish ghost films—situates them as somehow both the pinnacle and the gutter of contemporary horror. Many of these are American films, often connecting the threat of torture with foreign travel, as in Hostel (Eli Roth, 2005) and Turistas (John Stockwell, 2006), which present teenagers or young adults as victims of kidnapping and torture during those first youthful escapades abroad characteristic of upper-middle-class Americans. The emergence of these narratives of American youth, frequently men, going abroad and finding themselves immersed in what often amounts to an economy of torture must, I believe, be read as a tremendously projective fantasy—one in which American youth are figured as the victims rather than the perpetrators of this kind of organized violence. Particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing American military actions that resulted in the establishment of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay and the well-documented abuses at Abu Ghraib, it seems striking to posit Americans as the innocent objects of torture scenarios. At the minimum, the contemporary appearance of so many films about the economies, bodily experiences, and technologies of torture must be viewed in conjunction with the politics of torture that has concurrently occupied the American and world stage. As Dean Lockwood has pointed out in his own discussion of torture porn, critics and filmmakers alike have already
made the “obvious contextual links” between such films and recent discussions and representations of real-world torture. The fact that several of these films situate torture as an international affair is also telling, despite the fact that with the exception of *Turistas*, which invokes Latin American economic resentment as a rationale for the harvesting of American organs, these films disavow any explicitly political structure to the torture.

The *Saw* franchise, which emerged in 2004 and is still going strong (with, remarkably, a sequel released annually since then to enormous box office success), notably seems little marked by political commentary; further, unlike the films mentioned above, it situates torture as both domestic and highly personalized and pathologized. And yet the stakes of this continuing and successful series are instructive in relation to the way torture is figured in the larger sub-generic arena. The *Saw* films, clearly influenced by the tremendous success of David Fincher’s *Seven* (1995), tell the story of the serial killer “Jigsaw,” who kidnaps people and places them in scenarios that require them to make torturous choices in order to survive or save others, thus, according to Jigsaw, learning the “real” value of life. The choice at the center of the first film involves either having to saw off one’s own foot to get out of a chained cuff and kill another person, or allow one’s family to die. But the narrative progressions of all the films are not so simple as just to follow the wrangling with these choices. Rather, the narratives are organized around trying to determine precisely what the scenario is, what the choices are, and who is a victim and who is a perpetrator of these violences. The first *Saw* film (James Wan, 2004) hides the identity of Jigsaw until the surprise ending, and thus the central scenario is surrounded by a series of investigations into previous Jigsaw crimes and false leads for both the investigators and the audience. Ultimately, I think it would be reasonable to suggest that the films posit every character as both guilty and innocent.

This universality of guilt and innocence constitutes the more explicit moral-philosophical question at the center of these films: Is Jigsaw himself somewhat right, and are his “trials” for people who are wasting or abusing their lives really “saving” them? This possibility is foregrounded (in the first sequel) when one of Jigsaw’s surviving victims becomes his disciple. Thus the films, in what often seems less like a jigsaw puzzle and more like a game of pickup sticks, still manage to incorporate some themes easily extrapolated to contemporary politics: the morality or efficacy of torture, definitions of life, fundamentalist belief systems, and bodily and psychological experiences of violence.

I want to point out that despite the critical marking of these films as a disturbing symptom of the bloodlust of our times, they are also oddly trying to
work through some of the complexity of the experience of violence (and the anger with current formulations of and responses to these violences) in a less pedantic way than the more explicitly political films addressing topics such as torture. At the very least, it is highly notable that while films addressing contemporary politics, such as Rendition (Gavin Hood, 2007) and Lions for Lambs (Robert Redford, 2007), lost money, the Saw series has proved consistently marketable: Saw IV (Darren Lynn Bousman), the sequel released in 2007, grossed almost two times more than Lions for Lambs and Rendition combined.4 It seems worthwhile, then, to examine how Saw speaks to contemporary violences in a way that the more directly political films do not. One of the specific ways that the Saw films address some of the formulations of torture is by introducing technological mediation, and particularly surveillant structures, into the life-and-death “games” that Jigsaw stages. The series incorporates surveillance as a recurrent feature of Jigsaw’s methodology, and one that intermingles with the games of torture in various ways. Lockwood, reading these films within a Deleuzian framework as “allegories of control,” has also remarked on the Saw films’ “emphasis on surveillance and tracking.”5 My focus is the symptomatic nature of this inclusion of the video surveillance apparatus, and how, despite the many other points of reference in the film, it is this factor that connects these films in the most significant ways to political considerations.

The first two Saw films best organize a discussion of how surveillance functions. The first film centers on two men who find themselves mysteriously awakening in a filthy and dilapidated industrial bathroom, with another man dead on the floor in a pool of blood. They have no memory of how they got there, and via a series of clues, primarily audiocassettes that provide puzzling instructions in Jigsaw’s altered voice, they try to assess their situation and what they must do to escape. As the film progresses, it emerges for both the trapped characters and the audience that the men are being watched on video surveillance, or what seems more precisely to be closed-circuit television (CCTV). The film cuts from the scene of entrapment to a low-resolution video image of the same scene; the unidentified watcher of these images, shot from behind, is clearly implicated as the one orchestrating the entire scenario by virtue of his operation of the surveillance. The as-yet faceless surveillance operator and his seemingly predatory gaze are clearly deployed here in the mode of the killer-to-be-named-later traditional to horror films ranging from Peeping Tom (Michael Powell, 1960) to Halloween (John Carpenter, 1978). In and of itself, this straightforward deployment of video surveillance as part and parcel of the predation is unremarkable and would seem to be simply a
televisually technologized version of the sadistic voyeur killers with whom horror film has long been familiar.

But the surveillance and the video emerge in many additional places in the film—and the proliferation of these moments also complicates the theoretical models with which we can address them. The first time we actually see video technology within the film is when we are presented with a prior victim of Jigsaw recounting her trauma. She awakens trapped in a head-enclosing torture mask, and a video monitor turns on in front of her. The puppet that often serves as Jigsaw’s avatar appears on the monitor and informs the woman of why she is there and what she must do to escape. The video serves the same function as the audiotape for the two men we have already seen, and these tapes of various kinds thus become an integral part of the torture scenario. They are essentially the means of a select release of information to the victims, both escalating their horror and serving as a possible means of escape. Thus, whether the video is utilized to monitor torture scenes or incorporated as part of the torture itself, it is clear that the more obvious intent of the video technology for the Jigsaw character is to function as an organizational methodology serving to produce and control responses.

This would seem to add to the sadistic voyeur trope a Foucauldian theorization of surveillance as a disciplinary model: Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon, introduced in Discipline and Punish, has long served as the crux of analyses of surveillance, particularly as it is considered structurally. And though Foucault’s account emphasizes the production of “docile bodies” through a shift away from torture, Saw’s narrative use of surveillance within a torture film as a tool and form of confinement, control, and power has notable resonance with the Foucauldian account.6

But as many theorists of surveillance—particularly David Lyon and Kevin Haggerty—have noted, the panoptic model can no longer serve as a singular account of the politics of surveillance, especially as produced technologically. Haggerty provides the compelling critique that “the panoptic model has become reified, directing scholarly attention to a select subset of attributes of surveillance. In so doing, analysts have excluded or neglected a host of other key qualities and processes of surveillance that fall outside of the panoptic framework.”7 And as Lyon more specifically suggests, the dominance of “dataveillance”—the proliferation of digital information as a primary mode of contemporary social sorting and policing—as well as the overarching spectacularity of a world that does not fit into a unidirectional model of power as to who is watching and being watched, makes it hard to rely on the model of visual technologies as functioning in any straightforward way to organize and
support institutional power. I would add that even the films' narrative deployment of CCTV and video surveillance, which seems so insistently visual, finds itself, as will be discussed below, somewhat unclear in its functions and effects.

Lyon cites Giorgio Agamben as a thinker who importantly points out that "the panopticon was a distinct and bounded area; now . . . zones of indistinction are crucial, and in fact, are the locus of power." And it is to Agamben that I believe we might turn to examine the complex ways that cinematic surveillance narratives function, even when such formations might seem far more clearly addressed by the explicitly visual structures of panoptics and voyeurism, or even the Deleuzian formation of "control society" through which Lockwood has discussed surveillance in these films. In particular, these "zones of indistinction" show how narrative and technology interpenetrate in somewhat surprising ways. Agamben did not posit the notion of zones of indistinction in the specific formation of a concept of a surveillance culture, but more generally as a way to describe the way that Western politics has constructed itself around the biopolitical categorical pairing of bare life versus political existence, and the inevitable indistinctions that formula raises. In his description of the figure of homo sacer (sacred man), Agamben discusses the sovereign formulation of this figure of "bare life" as that which may be killed, but not sacrificed, which is to say it is neither human, nor divine, nor animal precisely. Agamben suggests that this "originary" zone of indistinction is the crux of a series of interrelated zones of indistinction that have become increasingly spatialized in modern politics (in particular, through the construction of the space of the "camp"). Theorists have taken up these ideas to look at the way that surveillance technologies and social formations around surveillance models operate with these zones of indistinction. While it is not possible to explore the full complexity of these formulations here, it seems of particular interest that Saw's torturous narrative logic parallels the bare life versus meaningful existence, subject versus object, exclusion versus inclusion formulations that Agamben points to as producing the zones of indistinction that characterize political power structures. Specifically, I want to show that these zones of indistinction characterize the rest of the film's surveillance models and the narrative result: torture and death.

Crucially, surveillance technologies in Saw produce characters as part of the mystery of guilt or innocence, and they introduce Jigsaw's self-righteous morality of the life-worth-living through his video and audio lectures. Over the course of the film, we are presented with several possible suspects of who Jigsaw might be: Danny Glover plays a police officer on Jigsaw's trail whom we later discover operating a surveillance operation that is marked as patho-
logical rather than legal. Holed up alone in a dilapidated apartment, mumbling to himself, and surrounded by newspaper clippings about the Jigsaw murders, the detective engages in both binocular and video surveillance that is coded as obsessively crackpot-ish, and which is clearly not sanctioned by the police as an institutional force. The character, aptly named Detective Tapp, thus himself becomes a suspect by virtue of his operation of a surveillance model. Also, Zep (Michael Emerson), a hospital orderly who had previously appeared suspicious, is seemingly “found guilty” as the killer when we see him operating a complex video surveillance system monitoring the men trapped in the bathroom. And, through flashback, we discover that Adam (Leigh Whannell), one of the men in the bathroom, has been taking surveillance photos of the other man (Cary Elwes). The question of whether Adam is a participant or a victim of the scenario is here also opened up by his own operation of surveillance. But it turns out that none of these people is actually Jigsaw, and, with the possible exception of Detective Tapp (whose surveillance operation turns out to be a vengeance/vigilante mission), all those who appear to be participating are themselves pawns of Jigsaw, suffering their own fates at his hands.

I want to note that not only is there a guilt and a pathology associated with the operation of surveillance technology here, but more important, it is the surveillance that blurs the distinction between who is the subject or object of torture, and which establishes the victims of the torture as somehow guilty in their own way. To point out that this reverses the general forensic point of surveillance—which is to establish guilt on the side of the surveilled sub-
jects—is clear. But what is significant here is that the narrative structure of the horror, as well as the torturous choices that the victims must make, becomes wrapped up not with a sadistic, voyeuristic, or even panoptic model, but with blurred boundaries, the production of ambiguity, and the formation of narrative zones of indistinction through the introduction of surveillance technologies and practices. Simply put, there is a turn here away from the classic horror formulation that “someone is being watched and there is danger there,” to “someone is being videotaped, and we don’t quite know what it means, who is operating the technology, and what the association with that technology implies.” Or, if extrapolated to a broader vision of how these films narratively reflect video surveillance practices, we can turn to Dietmar Kammerer’s conclusion in his essay on CCTV in Hollywood cinema: “It is not a question of ‘conspiracy’ or ‘complicity’ but rather of ‘complication’ and ‘complexity.’”

In a somewhat less pronounced manner, video surveillance technology is used to similar effect in several other films from the torture subgenre. In the explicitly torture-focused Captivity (Roland Joffé, 2007), for instance, the video surveillance technology follows a trajectory that demonstrates how even the most “traditional” formulation of surveillance within a sadistic voyeuristic model becomes necessarily complicated by the indistinctions circulating through video. Captivity is a return to the psychosexual slasher film, but within the torture genre. The film’s first segment presents a young model as she is stalked by someone—the stalking is presented as a video camera point-of-view shot, a clear harking back to Michael Powell’s Peeping Tom, which has been a defining moment for discussions of the coincidence between moving-image technologies and sexual violence. But just as I have argued in an earlier essay that the use of the small-format camera in Powell’s film hardly produces any straightforward subject/object relations, the multiple incorporations of video technology within Captivity serve to complicate the stalker-voyeur trope even as they remain central to the torture scenario.

After the abduction of the female target, Jennifer (Elisha Cuthbert), the majority of the film takes place in the torture chamber, which is—naturally—outfitted with myriad forms of surveillance technologies, including video monitors, two-way mirrors, and microphones, as well as video screens for playback (we are presented with flat screens for a more contemporary look than the square monitors of the Saw films, which are clearly meant to evoke a kind of violent primitivism even in the use of technology). The narrative unfolds as Jennifer is subjected to a series of terror-inducing experiences and what appears to be physical torture. But, as with Saw, the surveillance technology is used to mislead; here as well we realize that the video is primarily
used as *representation* to heighten her confusion and fear, rather than as only a methodology of voyeuristic excess or as a monitoring tool. She is, for example, shown a video of a prior victim, strapped down exactly as she is herself, as acid is poured on her face. The same process presented on video unfolds for Jennifer in the present, with a spigot beginning to pour the same ominous liquid as on the video. Jennifer is thus experiencing the video as a kind of anticipatory mirror, showing her what she is about to experience. Yet the liquid we see pouring onto Jennifer turns out not to have been acid—after a fade to black, she awakens with bloody bandages on her face, but as she peels them off, she discovers that she is still physically intact. These “games” grow even more complex as another captive is introduced into the scene: Gary (Daniel Gillies), a young man from whom she is at first physically separated and who is also being surveilled through video from the as-yet unidentified watcher. The romance and sexual encounter that develop are presented through cross-cutting as captured and enjoyed via video surveillance by a wine-drinking, still-faceless figure. Rather than this merely being another level of voyeuristic enjoyment for the director of this basement play, it turns out that Jennifer’s new romantic interest is in on the whole thing, and the entire development of the traditional heterosexual romance narrative is in fact part and parcel of the torture and surveillance—a manipulation. Video here moves firmly into the role of *representation* that stands outside its understanding within a surveillance logic as a purely documentary form. And though we could say here that the representation still performs a disciplinary role, it seems clear that it can do so only by virtue of its status as a highly ambiguous form.13

Another central part in this ambiguity is particular to the use of televisual technologies: the slippages and indistinctions that become foregrounded in the second *Saw* film are about whether the image is a live or prerecorded event. *Saw II* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2005) organizes its entire torturous narrative around a policeman watching his son on closed-circuit television attempt to survive various tests in a house along with other victims. Late in the film it turns out that this is not *live* CCTV, but a recorded video, and the “test”/torture we have been watching is not the son’s, but the policeman’s. And here, in these particular uses of video, we can get a better sense of how we might define the zone of indistinction—not just a trick or an ambiguity, but something that really is indistinct. The video is a live event, as it unfolds for the police officer and the film’s audience, but it is also a past event. The power the video holds over the narrative and the characters within it is in these very zones of indistinction.

The indistinctions produced by the surveillance models in all these films are almost necessarily punctuated by acts of incredible violence, and it is here
that we can begin to see how the very ambiguity of the surveillance model relies on the structural logic of torture as both narrative and ideological resolution. The closing montage of the first Saw film is particularly instructive. The sequence serves to organize all the prior narrative incoherence in a crescendo of violence in both content and form: as Jigsaw’s identity is finally revealed, a series of increasingly quick cuts strings together prior scenes of investigation and violence until a door is literally slammed on the narrative and the credits appear. All the prior ambiguities are shown to be manipulations organized by Jigsaw, and the “truth” of the various characters’ positions is demonstrated here not only by the more traditional narrative revelation of the “real” killer, but also stylistically. The high-speed reintroduction and reorganization of a series of images from the film represent the production of narrative clarity, but it seems more than incidental that this ostensible clarity is offered through a violent smashing together of the film’s earlier images. The narrative closure and the cementing of clear subject positions—the sense and sensibility that are produced here—are as much about the systematic reproduction of violence as about narrative resolution. Or, more to the point, resolution requires violence reorganized into, and as, a logic.

It is clear that surveillant representation and the proliferation of images of violence enhance torture narratives and, indeed, become a part of the deployment of power in torture scenarios. This extends beyond cinematic narrative into the realm of real contemporary tortures. Jasbir Puar highlights this fact in her analysis of the photographs that were emblematic of the abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib: “These images not only represent specific acts and allude to the procedural vectors of ever-expansive audiences but they also reproduce and multiply the power dynamics that made these acts possible in the first place.”14 But in addition to suggesting that the surveillance becomes a part of the torture, my point here is that the ambiguous narrative formation around surveillance asks for torture, hailing it in order to turn the zones of indistinction into resolved deployments of power. Because Jigsaw, as the representative of both ideological formation and narrative organization in the Saw films, serves as an organizing regime (rather than as merely the lone pervert), I argue that the film’s violence refers not to the breaking of laws, but also to the law itself and the political powers it deploys. As such, Jigsaw’s games become not just expressions of pathological violence, but a politics of surveillance and torture.

But it is not merely the fact that there is “an” ideology associated with Jigsaw that necessitates that we read his acts as political: more to the point, and returning to Agamben’s increasingly apt discussion in Homo Sacer, it is an ideology organized around definitions and designations of what constitutes life
that causes this film series to resonate with analyses of biopolitical constructions. In formulating the “originary zone of indistinction” as *homo sacer*, or bare life, “a life that could be killed,” we can begin to see how the zones of indistinction around surveillance in *Saw* are crucially tied to the film’s primary narrative concern with the production/elimination of a life through structural games of torture. I do not want to suggest necessarily that there is direct parallel between how Jigsaw asks his designated “subjects” to reconstruct their own relationships to life through torture—by making decisions about both their value systems and their very bodies in attempts to escape from various machines and scenarios—and Agamben’s discussion of how the designation of “bare life” by a sovereign can be thought of as “something like the originary ‘political’ relation.” But in an era when the ostensibly apolitical torture film is on the rise, it is also worth taking it to heart when Agamben states, “There is no clearer way to say that the first foundation of political life is a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed,” and dragging these films, kicking and screaming, back to their political context.

Insofar as the *Saw* films narrate torture as an ideological formulation around constructions of those that may live versus those that may die, they necessarily maintain themselves in a highly political sphere. But it is not the act of selection of victims by Jigsaw that suggests a political relation, with him as sovereign and his victim as the “bare life.” In fact, it is the games of torture—in combination with the surveillance formations and the narrative development—that all serve to construct for the films’ spectators our sense of who on-screen is deserving of life. The narratives unfold as we try to discern what the circumstances are that allowed the victims to be chosen for the “game,” and what choices they will make about their bodies, the bodies of others, and their own relations to their lives. These decisions are organized through the games of torture and the surveillance technologies that link the victims, the perpetrator(s), and the films’ audiences. Thus the selection of victims by Jigsaw is only part of the biopolitical formation: the torture, the surveillance, and the narrative all function in the films as *biopolitical technologies* serving to produce and sort out “bare life.” Pairing Agamben’s theoretical formation with the success of these films during an era that is similarly defining uses of torture in relation to highly politicized subjects, it seems clear that accepting these films’ conceit of addressing any “pure” or “instinctual” experience of life and death would ignore the deeply symptomatic reflection of not just the relations between surveillance and violence, but also the kinds of political subjects that emerge out of the zones of indistinction circulating within and through those relations.

A somewhat more straightforward but closely related way to address these
configurations is to note that what these filmic narratives reflect is that a surveillance culture, far from being a highly controlled deployment of power, produces such deeply unstable zones of visual, temporal, and ultimately political indistinctions that for a regime (or narrative) overseeing that culture, the mechanism of torture becomes necessary to cement power relations in identifiable forms that support the originating regime of surveillance. Or as Elaine Scarry writes in her discussion of "The Structure of Torture," "It is . . . precisely because the reality of [a regime's] power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used." Both narratively and politically, the surveillance here serves primarily to precipitate a specific kind of consolidating violence that will give meaning to that surveillance, as the closing montage of the first Saw film forcefully demonstrates. The fact that video surveillance in particular seems to produce specifically temporal ambiguities furthers this point by suggesting that the "liveness" of an event can only really be produced by the terrible presence of a body in pain, a fight for survival, or the moment of death. For, as Agamben argues in Homo Sacer, "Until a completely new politics . . . is at hand . . . the 'beautiful day' of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it." The Saw series hyperbolically reflects how "blood and death" and the "society of the spectacle" are not just related options, but also contiguous formulations: blood and death give a horrible grounding sense (and sensation) to the senselessness of rampant and incoherent spectactority.

Such a sweepingly negative statement about surveillance culture perhaps sums up the implications of the Saw films and a number of those other torture-porn films that deploy surveillance as a trope; but it is worthwhile to note that these surveillance models and their resulting formations of violence can also complicate and unravel the functioning of an oppressively stabilizing social and ideological system. A film such as Michael Haneke's Caché makes this clear through its very lack of clarity.

Caché might be considered to have a somewhat dubious relationship to the American torture franchises I have thus far been discussing. But Haneke's earlier films, such as Benny's Video and Funny Games (1997), could easily be seen as the artsy predecessors of the recent American horror market—a point driven home by the U.S. release of the American remake of Funny Games in 2007, directed by Haneke himself, and demonstrating that the earlier films are now retroactively inseparable from recent trends in American film. Benny's Video and Funny Games, both in their own ways, intermingle video surveillance and representation with traumatic, graphic violence scenarios and point in some highly revealing ways to the use of video as a methodology of torture
and a means of exaggerating cinematic violences. But it is with Caché, in its much more subtle, even meditative, use of video as aggression, that we might locate how the implicit political formulations I have pointed to within the American torture narratives become a more explicitly postcolonial model of technological politics and social relations organized around the intersection of surveillance and torture. The logic (or illogic) of video surveillance as seen in torture porn, as well as the stakes raised around regimes, violence, and so forth, do not just take on a racialized and politicized form in Caché—instead, that film reveals the political and racial disavowals at the heart of the films discussed above (as well as Haneke’s earlier films), and it explains the ways that subjective, narrative, and generic formations are working through one another in surveillance models.

Caché tells the story of a bourgeois host of a literary television show and his family who are being sent surveillance videos of their home, with no clear origin or agenda. For a variety of reasons, some seemingly internal to his own guilty associations, the TV host, Georges (Daniel Auteuil), suspects he is being targeted by an Algerian-French man, Majid (Maurice Bénichou), whom he knew from his childhood and whom Georges’s family was considering adopting until Georges caused him to be sent away through manipulative lies. Georges now tracks down Majid and violently accuses him of the present video aggressions; Majid compellingly asserts his own innocence, as does his adult son (Walid Afkir). The spectator’s growing view of Majid as now the victim of Georges is complicated by Georges’s later receipt of a videotape that was taken of the encounter between Georges and Majid at Majid’s apartment. This confusion extends through the rest of the film and remains not only narratively and affectively unresolved, but grows increasingly more complex. The narrative indeterminacies are, however, almost secondary to the extended visual indeterminacies that set up the film and continue throughout.

Ara Osterweil’s excellent 2006 review essay on Caché aptly describes the manner in which the film’s visual logic (or lack thereof) is introduced and developed in the film. Describing the opening shot—“Filmed with a static camera, uninterrupted by editing, and lingering longer than most viewers are accustomed to, this mysteriously ominous glimpse of French street life immediately sets the mood that is the hallmark of Haneke’s work: discomfort, suspicion, anxiety”—Osterweil suggests the complexity of the film’s visual affect, which is primarily associated with an inappropriately surveillant look.

It turns out that we were watching not just the film’s establishing shot but also a video within the film—the film’s opening shot is revealed, through a sudden fast-forwarding, to be the videotape that Georges and his wife, Anne (Juliette Binoche), are watching after it has been mysteriously delivered to
them. As D. I. Grossvogel describes it, “Only after this single take lasting nearly three minutes are we made aware that we are not outside the house but inside the Laurents’ television room, looking with them at the first tape.”

Thus the purpose and obviousness of an establishing shot is undermined by duration (long take), temporal manipulation (fast-forwarding), and the confusion of spatial parameters (outside is inside). The film’s opening here sets the terms for the way the introduction of video surveillance immediately destabilizes coherent structures through the indistinctions raised by narrative and visual interpenetrations. It is the particular indeterminate effects and affects of video technology as surveillance that refer to the systems of torture in the *Saw* films, connecting the American series’ myopic and self-contained scenarios to the explicitly racial and politicized implications of *Caché*.

While Haneke’s earlier films *Benny’s Video* and *Funny Games* might be said to be far more direct statements on the violence of video, one of the reasons *Caché* is so deeply compelling is that its very ambiguity speaks far more directly to the specificities of the use of video. *Caché* importantly makes all the questions and indistinctions I suggest emerge out of the *Saw* series more explicit by removing the explication: guilt and innocence, temporal ambiguity, violent resolution, all figure in this film as centrally as in the torture-porn examples, but without the ostensible clarity provided by the more traditional narrative structures and resolutions of the American films. The narrative zones of indistinction become central and unresolved, and they are particular to a video gaze and visibility. Because the film has a tremendously complex unfolding of affect and politics based in what is in some ways a profoundly simple plot formation, it provides a space to show how the *Saw* films are indicative of larger political formations—ones that either began as or have become racialized in very particular ways.

One of the primary things to understand about the way video functions in the film is the manner in which it provides both the instability and the punctuation of the film, and how the punctuation is not definitional and organizational, but instead elliptical and circular. It is of particular importance here that the “resolution” that video provides is completely irresolute. The opening scene sets the terms for this; not only do we not know who or why someone is being watched, but it is also unclear what the technology is that is producing the image, and whether that technology is intra- or extra-diegetic. At first, we think we are watching “the film,” which of course we always are, but then it turns out we are (narratively, as well as technologically) watching the video within the film. What in *Saw* is a narrative feint—are we watching this live or is it recorded, and what does it mean that a character is placed in seeming control of surveillance?—is similarly deployed in *Caché* through this opening
FIGURE 4.2. The opening shot of Caché (Sony Pictures, 2005).

FIGURE 4.3. The opening shot of Caché in fast-forward (Sony Pictures, 2005).

long take. Here, it produces an indistinction between whether we are watching this film or a video within the film, and whether the POV is subjective, technologized, or omniscient. This will be repeated in the film’s closing shot, which not only refuses to resolve the question of who or what is watching, but also whether the look is a threat. Though Saw’s unstable narrative could be considered incoherent (or frankly just stupid) whereas Caché’s narrative is thought of more as significantly ambiguous, I think it is not simply co-
incidence that both forms of instability are centered around video’s unclear status as representation or contemporaneous surveillance. In Saw, the temporal ambiguity opens up the space for—even demands—torture as a wishfully ahistorical call to violent bodily presence. But as we will see below, in Cache the attention to ambiguous temporality introduced by the video within the film calls attention to the historical productions of both pathologized and political violence.

The punctuating moment in the opening sequence—when the tape begins to fast-forward and we realize we are watching video—provides an answer of sorts to the questions raised by the extended length of the opening shot. But, of course, it also simply raises more questions and begins the circuit that continues with more videos and their implicit and explicit references to graphic violence. The following video punctuations follow the same structure of organizing the narrative into incoherence. While more tapes are received, along with childish drawings that indicate to Georges that the tapes have been sent by Majid (insofar as they refer to the lies Georges told about him when he was a boy), the next moment of definite narrative punctuation is when Majid kills himself in front of Georges during Georges’s second aggressive visit to the now increasingly beleaguered-looking Majid. But, as Osterweil succinctly puts it, “when a videotape of this clandestine meeting is sent to Anne and Georges’s television producer, all bets are off.” Shown twice—first from Georges’s subjective position, and then from the perspective of a hidden video camera—the suicide of Majid is a perfect example of the manner in which video surveillance and graphic violence work together in this film to process zones of indistinction in a somewhat different manner than American torture porn. Again from Osterweil, “On the one hand, the footage, which shows Georges as a belligerent, threatening presence, is a potentially incriminating piece of evidence that calls into question the audience’s (and Anne’s) initial assumptions about the true identity of the victimizer. On the other hand, the very fact that a tape has been made by a hidden camera within his low-rent flat suggests the impossibility of Majid’s innocence.” Here, the violence serves not to resolve the slippages of culpability and narrative coherence produced by the video, but also to produce more, and to do so in particular conjunction with the surveillance and re-presentation of this moment: Majid’s suicide would seem to place an almost primordial guilt firmly on Georges, in both his past and present aggressions against the Algerian. Majid’s sudden cutting of his own throat is so affectively shocking to both Georges and the film’s spectator that the very pace and tenor of the film are ruptured at this point into a moment of horrible presence. But since this incident makes clear that Majid’s apartment was equipped with a hidden
surveillance camera, which would seem to prove him guilty in the sequence of video aggressions against Georges that led to this moment, the introduction of video has once again established both everyone and no one as guilty and innocent. While in Saw and other torture films the violence becomes a moment of clarity, here that moment of clarity is merely reintroduced into the video gaze to highlight the circuit of violence and surveillance that is fundamentally unstable and constantly recoded. In other words, as soon as the cinematic plot would seem to provide some explanation or even resolution, a videotape reemerges to circle the narrative back into a state of total questionability around subject positions and the enactment of violence.

The film's open-ended conclusion provides a further view of this circumstance. Another long-take gaze, an extreme long shot (mirroring and circling us back to the beginning of the film), presents us with Georges's teenage son (Lester Makedonsky) on the steps of his school. There Majid's son approaches him, and the two have a discussion that we do not hear from the distanced position of visual surveillance. The initial question of the possible relationship between these boys is quickly followed up by the corollary question: If Majid's son is in front of the camera, and Majid is dead, with whom is this look from the video camera to be connected? Catherine Wheatley addresses these questions by pointing out that "one problem that poses itself is that the vast majority of the taped scenes are shot from seemingly 'impossible' angles: filmed from outside walls where bookcases stand, or from a position too high for a handycam operator unless they were standing very conspicuously on the roof of a car."26 Thus what is repeatedly suggested to be a diegetic video camera within the film both isn't and can't be explained by diegetic means. At the end of the film, the incoherence and ambiguity of all that had preceded finally announces itself as a kind of impossibility: the production of a video gaze (and its corollary visual field) that appears to be surveillant, with a materiality highly coded as a diegeticized, technologized "real," becomes also highly metaphorical and about the impossibility of all these video gazes. It is a recognizable visual code (voyeuristic, disciplinary, violent) that here decodes itself into abstraction.

In this way, the film ultimately offers up the surveillant gaze as both the primary structuring and de-structuring force, suggesting—in a somewhat different way than Saw—that surveillance is often an actual material formation, but one that deconstructs its own premises. Video surveillance establishes nothing but its own codes, until another logic (in many cases, a violent one) turns those codes into systems. Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong have discussed this on the sociological and criminological level in their detailed study of closed-circuit television in the United Kingdom. With the UK deploying
more video surveillance cameras than any other nation in the world, Norris and Armstrong note that on the most basic level, “while we are all increasingly under the camera’s gaze what this means in practice is that its implications for social control are dependent not so much on the cameras, but on their integration with other technologies, and the organisational environment in which they operate.”27 The narrative abstraction away from the material realities of surveillance video in Caché, in other words, is less a metaphor around a totalizing gaze than it is an insight into the very real fact that surveillance systems on their own are barely systemic or deterministic. Or, as Norris and Armstrong put it in relation to how CCTV might operate according to Foucault’s account of the panopticon, “the extent to which CCTV produces an ‘automatic functioning of power’ is questionable.”28 And yet to say that video surveillance becomes dispersed, abstracted, and metaphorized is not to say that surveillance is in itself “neutral” until it is applied—rather, it is a nonsystem that accesses visual, social, and historical codes of power and violence. The nonsystem will often be resolved into a system through the deployment of violence, as in the Saw films, or merely point back to its coding, as with Caché, in a manner that opens up a series of points of access to the violence and zones of indistinction in a surveilled situation: in this case, the postcolonial European bourgeois family.

The violence against and within that familial space achieved a kind of crescendo in Haneke’s 1997 Funny Games, the film that most explicitly connects the director’s work to the American torture films by virtue of Haneke directing his own faithful remake of the film for the American market in 2007. In these films, two teenage boys—coded by their matching tennis outfits and polite demeanor as privileged white youth—at first insinuate themselves into and eventually forcibly infiltrate an upper-middle-class white family’s country home, mount a campaign of psychological and physical violence, and finally murder the entire family (once again, a family comprising two parents with a single male child), one by one, in Haneke’s characteristically shocking matter-of-fact style. The films contain no narrativized surveillance and are quite insistent on being limited to the bourgeois domestic space, but here also Haneke refuses to engage in the “straightforward” narrative of torture without reference to mediation and spectatorship. First, occasional direct addresses to the film’s audience from the perpetrators of the violence imply a complicity of the spectator in the unfolding scenario. And it is with the television blasting sounds and images (almost as if it were a primary character in the scene) that the film reaches its horrifying pinnacle: the child of the family is executed with a shotgun. What the spectator is offered visually in this scene, however, is not the boy being shot, but the blood-splattered tele-
vision screen in the aftermath—a none-too-subtle connection between the images on the television screen and the violence of the film we are watching. But even more notably than all this, when one of the aggressors is surprisingly shot and killed, the film ruptures its already somewhat reflexive diegetic space entirely when the other perpetrator, traumatized at the death of his partner in crime, grabs a remote control and rewinds the film we are watching as if it were a videotape. Reclaiming mastery over the narrative, the boy takes the narrative back in time and “rescues” his partner for the continuation of their “funny games.” This moment is, of course, a similar gesture to that of the opening shot of Caché, when the otherwise cinematically realistic shot is interrupted by a fast-forwarding, reframing (literally) what we’re seeing as a video rather than a cinematic narrative. The gesture also similarly signifies the temporal instability of the video image discussed earlier: not only is video used to undermine a clear temporal location, but it is here also used to refuse both visual and narrative realism.

Funny Games, in both its pre- and mid-torture-porn incarnations, is clearly more invested in a direct critique of media violence than it is in the political complexity of circuits of surveillance (which is not to say that these are unrelated issues; the intersection between representation and surveillance is clearly central to this discussion). But of greater interest to me is the casting of the scene of torturous violence as that of the highly mediated bourgeois home, and the perpetrators of the violence not as outsiders to that environment, but as themselves white, educated, “proper” young men. The way in which even a home-invasion narrative is posited as one in which the invaders seem more like insiders than outsiders highlights how internal this violence is to that domestic space.

The violence and disintegration within the European bourgeois family unit that is at the heart of Funny Games, as well as virtually all of Haneke’s other films, in Caché assumes a more explicit focus about what some of that violence contains. The family unit is extended to reveal the repressed element—the “adopted” (colonized) North African who has been simultaneously implicated in and ejected from the white “family.” The infantilization, pathologized jealousy, guilt, perversity, and aggression that constitute the personal family narrative of this film here also represent the circuit of racialized violence and projection of contemporary Europe in a postcolonial and now “post-9/11” era. Or, as Osterweil aptly sums up, “Haneke suggests that First-World talk of ‘post’-colonialism involves denial and attempted self-exculpation—an effort to defend against any acknowledgement of continuing internal and international oppression and injustice.”29 The way these issues focalize around the video gaze and a lack of clarity about the origin, production, control, mean-
ing, and use of these videotapes suggests not only the manner in which mediation functions both to produce and obscure the particularity of these social relations, but also specifically the way that technologies of surveillance—so weighted with signification around power relations and the visibility of truth—become a point of access, if a violent one, to the circuit of projection and injustice around race in “post”-colonial Europe.

Haneke’s earlier film Benny’s Video introduces racialization as a disavowed production of surveillant violence in somewhat the reverse direction, which proves illuminating for a structural reading of Caché. This film, taking place in Austria, quietly tells the story of a white, bourgeois teenager named Benny (Arno Frisch) whose obsession with violent video imagery causes him to organize his life around video rentals, a repeated watching of a video of his family’s participation in the slaughter of a pig with an air gun, and the setting up of video cameras to monitor both the world outside his apartment window and within his darkened room. Inviting a young girl home from a video store with no recognizable intent, Benny shoots her with the air gun in what seems like an only vaguely aggressive manner. The scene is caught on the video camera, and eventually he shows it to his parents, who, with a kind of stunned complicity, try to figure out how to manage it. As his father cleans up the mess, Benny’s mother takes him on a subdued tourist expedition to Egypt, a “vacation” that serves to reframe the mediated events at home significantly. Although the televisual and videotape imagery is clearly the centerpiece of the film—and suggests, like Funny Games, a rather straightforward indictment of the contemporary culture so inundated with television violence that, as if by sleepwalking, Benny simply reproduces—it is the family’s covering up of the crime that marks the colonial production of race in those circumstances, one which does so in the interest of the bourgeois family unit.

The aftermath of the violence is most telling in this regard. The son returns from his Egyptian vacation with a tan, a shaved head, and a knit kufi. Benny’s visual transformation shows how the sociopathic violence at the heart of the bourgeois European family has become cast as racial other during the cover-up, with a gesture as direct as a vacation. Most simply, we could say that Benny’s act of violence leads to his production—visually—as racialized other. While the television news shown earlier in the film focuses on the ethnic violence in the collapsing Yugoslavia, here Benny is cast off and reemerges as a more particular remnant of western European ethnic violence. The danger within is sent abroad and returns, as if it had always come from there. While this is already a powerful critique of the projection and disavowal of white European violence, the fact that Benny comes back from this trip and turns himself and his parents in to the police recasts the issue as a return of the
repressed in the form of culpability. Benny’s visual coding as the colonized other brings the responsibility home to roost not because he truly represents the “other” that highlights the structural violence of his culture, but because he represents the very process of visual coding and recoding that has clearly marked the violent production of racialized subjects in colonial and postcolonial Europe: a production, as has so often been noted, tied both historically and experientially to mediated visibility. The account given by Frantz Fanon best communicates the violence in the circuits of visualization at the heart of the colonial enterprise, particularly in relation to mediation: “I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me.”30 The fact that for Fanon the experience of cinematic spectatorship is also an experience of the intensive surveillance of him as a racialized object highlights how even narrative cinema, a media form less associated with surveillance, becomes enmeshed in that project specifically through the production of race in the colonial context.

Returning to Caché, we can see visual coding, recoding, and, crucially, decoding operating far more explicitly as a function of the surveillant gaze, as stated above, but with the racial and postcolonial issues more centralized. The repeated and ultimately unresolved introductions of the videotapes and video POV shots as simultaneously accusatory, exculpatory, evidentiary, irrelevant, and simply impossible, force the issue: the idea of social identities and relations as produced by a visual-cultural field, particularly one defined by surveillance, makes sense only if we understand those productions as also irrevocably destabilized by that same visuality. Put simply, every time a video image appears in the film, it undermines any prior stability of form or content. Insofar as race is also often visually produced as a marker out of that same surveillant field, it, too, becomes a coded position that is here also decoded even as it is centralized in the zones of indistinction of modern politics and media.

In the end, that now-clichéd phrase “caught on tape” becomes deeply ironic—ultimately, video as surveillance “catches” nothing, but rather opens up spaces for a series of violences. The types and uses of these violences are what remain to be determined. In Saw, narrative figuration suggests not only that video surveillance is part of the methodology of torture, but also that torture is hailed as a resolution to ambiguities within the field of surveillance. For its part, Caché implies that the surveillance model is so deeply unstable that when followed to its (il)logical conclusion, it deconstructs its own functions in a manner that may well be violent, but possibly in a way that, unlike the Saw films, undoes rather than reintroduces the conceit of a stable and deterministic visual field.
Thus my choice to read the ostensibly new genre of torture porn through reference to Haneke’s work is a suggestion that the generic codes of cinema are not separate from the coding of subjectivity that is happening around video surveillance—this coding is itself a constant decoding, a manifestation of recognizable boundaries that points only to interrelated structures that have no clear boundaries. Torture porn must be read as trans- and international, trans- and inter-generic, trans- and inter-technological, simply because the narrative formations of surveillance and torture insist on the production of boundaries only to blur them, and the introduction of indistinctions only to produce (un)stable resolutions. Despite the hyperbolic insistence on the recognizability of graphic, bloody torture as monitored and produced by video surveillance in American contemporary horror, that very subject matter opens up to the complexity of the international political and technological stages—which are, in fact, the more literal (non)-locations of torture and surveillance in current times.

NOTES

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1. Quarantine is the American remake of the Spanish film [Rec] (Jaume Balaguero and Paco Plaza, 2007).

2. Even several years before this most recent spate of surveillance films, John Turner noted that “surveillance as a narratival and structural device in popular cinema is indeed ubiquitous.” “Collapsing the Interior/Exterior Distinction: Surveillance, Spectacle, and Suspense in Popular Cinema,” Wide Angle 20 (October 1998): 94. And as Thomas Levin has so compellingly argued, “A socio-political understanding of surveillance at the dawn of the new millennium must also include an analysis of the striking proliferation of the rhetorics of surveillance—at both the thematic and the formal level—in virtually all contemporary media ranging from cinema and television to cyberspace.” “Rhetoric of the Temporal Index: Surveillant Narration and the Cinema of ‘Real Time,’” in CTRL [SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother, ed. Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 581.


6. As Foucault states, within the modern system of discipline and punishment, "the body as the major target of penal repressions disappeared." But the interaction of torture and surveillance within these films proves illuminating for a discussion about how, despite the move away from public spectacles of bodily abuse, surveillance practices are intersecting with torture in new formations. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 8.


9. Ibid., 11, and Lockwood, "All Stripped Down," 45.


13. *Vacancy* builds its narrative in the reverse trajectory but for the same end: the realization from two motel guests that the videos in their room are not just disturbing horror films left for their entertainment, but documents of prior violent murders in their own room, serving to escalate their fear as they become the objects of the production of a new "snuff" video.


16. Ibid., 85.

17. Ibid., 89. Lockwood, in his Deleuzian account of torture porn mentioned above, has similarly noted (through reference to the work of Benjamin Noys) that it is difficult to consider these films outside the formulation of "bare life" that Agamben posits. But despite his invocation of Noys and Agamben, as well as his noting of the *Saw* films' surveillance aspects, Lockwood goes on to argue primarily for an understanding of torture porn as a cinema of affect that in its extremity represents a transformative and liberatory masochism. "All Stripped Down," 44–45.


20. Ara Osterweil, review of *Caché, Film Quarterly* 59 (Summer 2006): 35.


22. As Catherine Wheatley points out, this technological confusion is significantly produced by the use of high-resolution digital video. While earlier video images within film are often marked off as low-res, and thus stamped with the mark of a gritty reality, Haneke's turn to digital video here also introduces indistinction between the subjectivized, diegeticized video surveillance gaze, and the narrative and visual verisimilitude of the cinematic image. It is not of neutral interest that this apparently
“aesthetic” (or simply commonsense) choice is made not only when narrative films are increasingly composed of digital production and postproduction, but also when surveillance is increasingly composed of a relation between visual and informational technologies. “Secrets, Lies, and Videotape,” *Sight & Sound* 16 (February 2006): 32–36.

23. Interestingly, the high-resolution video is now a VHS tape, which is a bit incongruous.


25. Ibid.


29. Osterweil, review of *Caché*, 38.