

**Street Scenes:
Surveillance, Immigration, and the Algerian War in Paris**

The division between public and private remains a key tenet of French republicanism. As the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the last two decades makes clear, this division can buttress a national self-definition based on racial, ethnic, and religious exclusion, designating cultural difference as *practice* that must be confined to the private sphere. The narratives of immigrants from former colonies thus offer particularly illuminating readings of contemporary public space in the French nation. In what follows I will take a few examples of such readings from recent literary texts, television, and film in order to delve into the ways in which public space, colonial history, and surveillance intersect in the encounters of immigrants – legal and illegal – with the city of Paris. I begin by looking briefly at works by Cameroonian writer Jean-Roger Essomba, “*beur*” (second-generation Algerian) writer and singer Mounsi, and Franco-Algerian filmmaker Dominique Cabrera before focusing in more detail on Austrian director Michael Haneke’s 2005 film *Caché* (*Hidden*). In each example, my focus is on the space of the street as the stage for moments of friction between Paris and its immigrant population, underscoring the divisions along legal, racial, and historical lines that come sharply up against the French Republican brand of political universalism. While Mounsi and Essomba envision the street as a hostile space for the city’s outsiders precisely because it is a public space, Cabrera and Haneke use the street to imagine subversions of this link between public space and cultural expurgation. Haneke’s attention to technologies of surveillance in *Caché* foregrounds the contingent borders between public and private space while at the same time inscribing the French nation’s colonial past onto its contemporary streets.

Prayer on the *périphérique*: Mounsi’s *La Noce des fous*¹

La Noce des fous (1991), recently translated into English as *The Demented Dance*, is the first novel by singer and writer Mohand Nafaa Mounsi (who signs as simply “Mounsi”). Its themes and

characters woven together with those of his later novels and essays, *La Noce des fous* paints a bleak portrait of Paris through the eyes of the city's outcasts: the children of North African immigrants. The narrator, Tarik Hadjaj, is a young second-generation immigrant who, having lost his mother at birth, watches his father lose his job and turn to alcohol as he himself is absorbed into a life of petty crime, drugs, prostitution, foster homes, and incarceration. His description focuses on the despair and decay that characterize his daily life in the *banlieue*, the city's outskirts separated from central Paris by the infamous *périphérique* highway. In the scene I want to highlight here, Mounsi presents an unusual spatial configuration by establishing the ring road itself as the physical setting, rather than according it its more typical symbolic function in portraits of the Parisian *banlieue* as border or impasse. Here Tarik's father is to be found praying on the tarmac:

In the middle of the capital's ring road, between the lanes, surrounded by the rumble of metal and the rush of cars, motorbikes, buses, the stink of petrol and gas and the deafening city roar, a man prays. He has spread out a white cloth before him and neither the curses nor the jeers of the drivers interrupt his slow prostration. He prays on the tarmac as if on holy ground (15).

This striking, slightly fantastical image crystallizes the contingencies of Maghrebian immigration in France: the dissonance of Muslim practices in a French secularist landscape, the mockery and anger of the "mainstream" Parisians whose daily life is disrupted by this exogenous chronology. Played out on the critical non-space of the ring road – neither a destination nor a stopping place but a border between center and margin – this confrontation also dramatizes the meeting of urban and rural. Tarik's father forgets the concrete walls around him to immerse himself in the memory of home: "He is over there now, in the midst of songs, locusts, wasps, among the shepherds and the herds of goats and sheep and clumps of nettles" (16). The father's pastoral recreation of his homeland forms a defiant erasure of the "deafening city roar" and of the curses and jeers that accost him.

In its defiance, this disruption must be removed, however; and soon enough four men in white coats restrain Tarik's father in a straitjacket and whisk him away in an ambulance. Madness, then, rather than criminality, is the pretext for removing this Muslim Arab from Parisian society; having used his labor in its factories for years, the French state moves peremptorily to the disposal of this

man, equipped with the ready tools of racism and stereotype. The impetus is simultaneously to remove an obstacle from the circulation of mainstream Paris life and to erase a Muslim man's presence from the all too public space of the *périphérique*. In this respect the moment becomes the portrait of an entire generation of Arab immigrants in France, many of whom were recruited to provide manual labor during the “trente glorieuses,” the three decades of economic prosperity following the Second World War when France looked across the Mediterranean to replace its labor force. The resentment faced by many of these laborers, fuelled by the violence of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), was the symptom of a larger cultural clash between non-European immigrants and Republican ideals that maintained a strict separation between secularist public space and the private sphere of cultural and religious practice.

Hiding Out: Essomba's *Le Paradis du Nord*²

Jean-Roger Essomba's literary work reflects an enduring concern with the intercultural encounter.³ One of the author's signature traits is also the recurrent geographical shift from his native Cameroon to France and back, with particular attention to the cities of Douala and Paris as the focal points in this exchange. Essomba thus figures as one of a number of writers from sub-Saharan Africa whose diasporic viewpoints permeate their work and demand more nuanced literary categories.⁴ His second novel, *Le Paradis du Nord* [Northern Paradise, 1996], is a key reference in this respect, especially in its emphasis on a comparative urban framework. Inscribed in an important literary corpus of Francophone African crime novels, this portrayal of Afro-Parisian space as a marginalized underworld focuses on the fate of the city's undocumented immigrants, or *sans-papiers*.

The *sans-papiers*'s introduction to Paris is predetermined as one that must erase its trace as it goes, and thus occurs only in unofficial spaces and via unseen conduits. The space of noir – the illicit world of murder, counterfeit identities, drugs, and prostitution – is the space the novel's protagonist, Jojo, is constrained to inhabit because of his undocumented status. An idealistic bartender from

Douala, Jojo suffers betrayal from both the white French and established African immigrant population in his attempt to penetrate the city of his dreams. Due to the interurbanism of Essomba's work, this vision of Paris appears in a comparative light, as the protagonist, hiding out in an abandoned building, evokes the stark disparity between homelessness in Douala and homelessness in Paris:

Il avait passé sept années de son enfance dans la rue pourtant il n'avait jamais rencontré pareille misère. Dans leurs carcasses de voitures, ils pouvaient rire et chanter. Lorsque leurs jambes étaient engourdies, ils pouvaient sortir et courir. Mais dans sa nouvelle demeure, il pouvait à peine tousser. (114)

He had spent seven years of his childhood in the streets but he had never known such hardship. In their abandoned car shells, they could laugh and sing. When their legs got stiff, they could go outside and run. But here in his new residence he could hardly even cough.⁵

The severe constriction on the protagonist's sounds and movements speaks to the precariousness of his situation as an undocumented immigrant, but the reflection also underlines how different the texture of the urban landscape he encounters in Paris is from that of his native city. In contrast to the indeterminate spaces of the Doualan landscape where movement is facilitated by fluid boundaries between official and unofficial space, Jojo evokes Paris as a closed, tomblike city where detection will mean his expulsion. The attempt to survive these harshly dichotomized spaces thus forces him deeper into the city's crevices, culminating in his fate in the classically sublimated space of the prison.

Capital in the Gutter: Cabrera's *Quand la ville mord*

The sense of distance on the personal level and the geographical incidence of colonial history on the collective level are palpable in many of Dominique Cabrera's films. Born in 1957 in Algeria, Cabrera moved to France as a child. Her early documentaries, shorts and feature films reflect a particular concern for social justice and exiled characters. Cabrera is perhaps best known for her 1997 feature film, *L'Autre côté de la mer* [The Other Shore], which stars Claude Brasseur and Roschdy Zem and explores the tensely nuanced friendship between a pied-noir and a French Arab who meet in Paris. Invited by the television station France 2 and Agora Films to adapt a title in the *Suite noire* series of crime fiction published by La Branche, Cabrera explains that the clash between the Parisian cityscape

and the figure of the clandestine immigrant woman in Marc Villard's *Quand la ville mord* held particular appeal: 'J'ai été très touchée par le personnage de Sara [...] Sara vit des choses épouvantables mais elle n'est pas une victime, elle se bat' [I was deeply touched by the character of Sara [...] Sara goes through horrific experiences but she's not a victim, she fights back] (1).⁶ Cabrera also evokes the challenge of depicting prostitution on screen, saying that the film intimidated her because 'il aborde un sujet difficile à mettre en images' [it takes on a subject that's difficult to put into images], but that this is also the reason she chose it (1). This concern reflects the careful balancing act demanded by this project: to meld the narrative's proclivity towards pulp violence with the desire to portray the everyday world of prostitution in a way that neither banalizes nor glamorizes it.

In addition to the concern with the shift to the visual, Cabrera makes a number of important plot changes in her adaptation of the novel for television in order to frame the narrative more assertively as Sara's, opening the film with the protagonist's arrival from Bamako and remaining tightly focused on her throughout. But it is the pulp violence of *Quand la ville mord* that functions as the principle avenue towards this assertion of Sara's subjectivity. A transformative moment for the protagonist is the death of her friend and compatriot Zina, callously murdered by their pimp Omar. Sara embarks on a bloody quest for revenge, felling first Zina's killer, then two of the henchmen who pursue her in the hope of earning the reward money that has been placed on her head, and finally Omar's partner Brigitte. The close-ups of Sara's face in these scenes further emphasize the emancipatory gesture of these acts, while the shots of her feet next to the dead bodies of her victims signal the impulse to leave her mark on the city that betrayed her.

Sara plays upon her own invisibility in the urban landscape as she pursues Omar and Brigitte. She lurks in the hallways of the bar where she finds Omar, emerging out of the darkness in the bathroom so that he only sees his killer in the mirror. Even in its desperation, moreover, her pursuit of Brigitte bears the mark of careful calculation and a keen awareness of the hierarchies of visibility to which she is subject: Sara lies in wait until Brigitte is alone in the street, then calls her on her cell

phone, taunting her sadistically before emerging suddenly from a doorway and stabbing her to death. ‘Tu ne me vois pas’ [You don’t see me], she whispers, ‘Je suis en face de toi’ [I’m right in front of you], as Brigitte turns in wild circles trying to find her. Sara’s violence can thus be read as a means of exploiting and protesting the state of nonexistence to which Brigitte and Omar had reduced her, while at the same time defying the erasure of her friend Zina’s death as an unrecorded, unacknowledged murder.⁷

Cabrera’s addition of Brigitte to the list of Sara’s victims in her adaptation of the novel lends particular weight to the notion of the protagonist’s pulp violence as a vehicle for the systemic rejection of her status, rather than as isolated moments of revenge. In killing Brigitte, Sara eliminates the heart of the machine that engulfed her upon her arrival in France, freeing herself from the debt that bound her to that system and removing the value placed on her own head after Omar’s death. She marks this gesture symbolically by recuperating the passport that Omar had taken from her upon her arrival in Paris, clutching it defiantly in her hand as she walks away from Brigitte’s body. On the other hand, in one of the film’s most striking scenes, Sara dispenses with the money that she had also taken from one of her victims: sitting on the edge of the sidewalk on a busy street, Sara washes the blood from her face and hands in the water from the gutter as she slowly allows the paper bills to fall from the stolen wallet. Cars and pedestrians pass between the spectator’s gaze and Sara, underlining her subjugated and incidental status in the city; but her gesture at once reverses the dichotomy between private and public spaces – a dichotomy, moreover, upon which noir hinges – by removing evidence of her crimes “in broad daylight,” and rejects the capitalist system that sustains the world of prostitution and human trafficking. This arresting scene, accompanied only by the sound of ambient traffic and the rushing of the water through the gutter, thus paints a portrait of a young African immigrant that comes sharply up against prevailing narratives on illegal immigration in Europe: while the very presence of *sans-papiers* in Paris is marked by capital – they are presumed to be there for money, to be undocumented and

homeless because they lack it – Sara quietly but deliberately discards that currency into the city’s sewer system.

Streets Unseen: Michael Haneke’s *Caché*

Michael Haneke’s 2005 film *Caché* [Hidden], with its perfect thematic storm of bourgeois intellectual culpability, technological self-referentiality, and discursive indeterminacy, quickly generated a robust critical response on both sides of the Atlantic. The film’s refusal to offer closure to the range of thorny political and ethical questions it raises has opened the door for abundant speculation on the meaning of Haneke’s unsettling portrait of contemporary Paris. His trademark techniques of disrupting unselfconscious spectatorship coalesce here around the use of videotaped footage of undetermined origin; as numerous critics have noted, *Caché* underscores vision, authorship, and surveillance as key sources of anxiety for the contemporary audience.⁸ At the same time, despite the director’s own protestations to the contrary,⁹ the particular set of conflicts and historical moments around which the film’s enigmas are woven – the colonial and postcolonial relationship between France and Algeria, the police massacre of October 17, 1961 – insert Haneke’s work into an ongoing discussion on immigration, postcolonialism, and collective memory.

The film’s protagonist, Georges, played by Daniel Auteuil, is the television host of a literary talk show who receives increasingly disturbing videotapes delivered anonymously and accompanied by childlike drawings of violent images. The videotapes suggest surveillance at a technical level in that the footage they present is unedited and filmed from a fixed position, while they imply surveillance at the psychological level in that they impose an exposure and loss of privacy to an unknown viewer. The first videotape presents two hours’ worth of footage of the street outside the Parisian home where Georges lives with his wife Anne (played by Juliette Binoche) and his teenage son Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky), alarming not for its content but because of its existence. Subsequent videos, accompanied by the violent drawings, disturb Georges’ complacency further by presenting

locations and events known to very few people (his childhood home, a confrontation with a childhood friend inside that man's apartment), while his lines of privacy are further encroached upon by the delivery of one of the incriminating tapes to his superior at work and of one of the drawings to his son at school. Later, the various discursive levels of the film become blurred so that it is not clear if we are watching additional "surveillance" footage or a rendition of the protagonist's memory shot using the same techniques as the surveillance video.

The privacy that has been disrupted by these tapes encompasses a particular event in Georges' past when, as a child of six, he prevents the adoption by his parents of Majid, the son of the North African immigrants working in his family's home, by falsely accusing Majid of a violent attack. The symbolism of this gesture for a global, post-9/11 audience needs little parsing: the fantasy of violence projected onto the Arab other, justifying his expulsion from the European family whose bloodlines thereby remain intact. Compounding this symbolism in the context of the Algerian War of Independence is the reason for the potential adoption of Majid: his parents were apparently among the many victims of the widespread police aggression that took place in Paris on October 17, 1961, in response to a peaceful demonstration of North African men, women, and children. This shameful moment in French history, quickly and vigorously covered up by then chief of police Maurice Papon, has for many become emblematic of the tense relationship between France and the country's Algerian immigrants. The state censorship and persistent silence concerning the massacre – a subject of revived attention in the wake of François Hollande's recent acknowledgment of the massacre on its fifty-first anniversary – parallels the national silence concerning the war and exacerbates the sense that French North Africans have been written out of the national collective memory.¹⁰

Despite the fact that this historical context is mentioned only in passing in Haneke's film, its affective weight is such that allegorical interpretation turns insistently toward the postcolonial: Georges, the bourgeois intellectual everyman (Haneke uses the same character names, Georges and Anne, in his other films as if to underscore their generic dimension), stands in for a guilty nation

plagued by the repressed memory of a horrendous injustice and refusing to take responsibility for its crimes. In the dominant postcolonial reading of the film (with the notable exception of Paul Gilroy's assessment of the film's "disturbing" lack of depth concerning race and national responsibility¹¹), the anxieties of surveillance generated by the anonymous delivery of videotapes suggest a reversal of the colonial gaze: Georges, shocked out of his middle-class liberal complacency, is the object exposed to sanction by an unknown authority. The film's many diegetic tricks and its enigmatic closing scene (in which Georges' and Majid's sons appear to know each other), meanwhile, seem to underscore the impossibility of resolving such longstanding questions of national culpability and disavowed history. While he suspects the adult Majid of being his surveillance terrorist, Georges is unable to establish the source of the accusations embodied by the videotapes and thus unable to redeem himself. The attempt for "closure" on the subject of colonial crimes is undermined thematically and formally, the necessity of a trenchant examination of the past put forward without any implication that this exercise will repair anything.

This indeterminacy rests in part in the unanswered question of who has generated the surveillance tapes and sent them to Georges. As Georges himself suggests in the opening scene, where we see him walking out into the street to attempt to determine the vantage point from which the first videotape was filmed, the very existence of the tapes defies technology: there is no place within the diegesis of the film where the surveillance camera could have been located.¹² The eye of surveillance is an impossible eye, and blame for the "terrorizing" acts thus impossible to establish. Haneke also elaborates a temporal and geographical gap in his inscription of surveillance technology in the film: the penultimate scene shows Majid's final departure from Georges' parents' home in 1961 through a fixed camera placed at a distance from the action. As critics have noted, the juxtaposition of this scene with the preceding one in which Georges takes a sleeping pill and withdraws into his bed suggests that the childhood scene is a flashback generated by Georges' memory, its fixed-camera presentation suggesting a merging between surveillance filming and Georges' consciousness.¹³ Still, this formal

indeterminacy only further obstructs attempts to “solve” the film’s multilayered enigma, thereby prolonging – in the postcolonial reading of the film – the confrontation with national shame without allowing the question of culpability to be resolved.¹⁴

Less attention has been given to the topic of public space in Haneke’s film, but this forms a particularly interesting intersection with the film’s dramatization of surveillance.¹⁵ Public space – especially the street – as an arena for the uneasy encounter between strangers separated by gender, class, and race is a regular theme in Haneke’s work,¹⁶ and *Caché*, with its inclusion of a brief altercation between the harried Georges and a black man who nearly runs into him on his bicycle, is no exception in this respect. But the film’s opening scene also presents an image of public space: the Paris street that, because of the fact of its being filmed and the way in which it is filmed, comes to function for Georges and Anne as a private space that has been violated by the unidentifiable camera. The first videotape is unsettling in that it marks the selection of a specific address in Paris amongst the countless spots publicly available to human and digital eyes, thus aligning the proliferation of public spaces in the city with the potential ubiquity of surveillance. The fact that Georges is a public figure, appearing regularly via technology in the living rooms of strangers, further highlights the intricate contingencies of private and public space at play in Haneke’s film.

Of course, the barely mentioned event at the heart of the film – the police massacre of October 17, 1961 – was also, in mass scale, a racially charged struggle in the street. Indeed, it was in a sense a struggle *for* the street: the demonstration of over twenty thousand men, women, and children was a protest against a wartime curfew imposed by Papon that “advised most urgently” and “strongly recommended” (as outright prohibition would have left Papon vulnerable to charges of illegal discrimination) that Algerian workers abstain from circulating “in the streets of Paris” after 8:30 p.m. and that “French Muslims” circulate alone rather than in groups.¹⁷ The march was at once a demand for independence, a condemnation of racial discrimination, and a claim to the streets. The police’s

disposal of bodies into the Seine River, meanwhile, serves as an all too literal gesture of eradication, ridding the city's public spaces of its undesirable inhabitants.

It is for this reason that we could add a third dimension to the importance of Haneke's insistent juxtaposition of past and present in the film. It is possible to read this temporal framework, as many critics have, as the structure for a study of personal guilt and shame, and then allegorically as the portrait of national, postcolonial guilt and shame.¹⁸ But to the extent that the film also suggests a meditation on technology, in particular on the technology (and psychology) of surveillance, the alternation between past and present also sketches out a technological history, reminding us of the contrast between the surveillance tools available in 2005, at the time that the film was made, and those available in 1961. The formal resemblance between the view of Georges' childhood memory and the film's opening shot of the adult Georges' home in Paris, in other words, suggests not only an uncanny merging between Georges' perspective and surveillance, as Todd Herzog argues, but also the anachronism of technology¹⁹: if the eye of surveillance proves physically impossible to locate in the film's first scene, its uncanniness in the penultimate scene arises also from the implied presence of a fixed camera in a rural setting in 1961.

This temporal incongruity serves to underscore the notion of the October 1961 massacre as an incident of suppressed witnessing: the collective "eye" that viewed these events has been erased by a combination of state censorship, shame, and horror so that nearly fifty years later a middle-aged Parisian man is compelled to detail them to his wife while pretending that they are so widely known and acknowledged that he doesn't need to (he prefaces this disavowed narrative – mostly rendered in brief muttered fragments rather than in complete sentences – by telling his wife that he "won't draw [her] a picture" of what happened on October 17, 1961, using an idiomatic expression in French that links his relationship to these events to the drawings that accompany the videotapes). Indeed, if we view the film's opening scene in light of the historical context selected by Haneke for this film, what is striking about that first videotape is the silence and emptiness of the Paris street. Elizabeth Ezra and

Jane Sillars note in their contribution to the *Screen* dossier on *Caché* that the soundtrack for the film's first and penultimate scenes are identical except for Majid's screams which are edited out of the first scene.²⁰ This detail certainly serves as a highly evocative reference to the suppression of North African voices and lives in October 1961. But it also points at yet another level to the inscription of an anachronistic technology into the narrative of a past crime, reminding us through the disjuncture of sound of the improbability that Georges' childhood secret was recorded.

If we read *Caché* as highly equivocal revenge tale with no victor, as a tale of incrimination with no reparation, the story it tells of public space is similarly charged. For although the film turns the gaze back onto the colonizer, invoking the scopic realm of twenty-first technology to do so, *Caché* also tells of the *absence* of that technology in 1961. Just as the penultimate farmhouse scene clashes with its formal presentation, the public spaces being claimed by the October 1961 demonstrators were not subject to the ubiquitous surveillance technologies available in 2005. The scarcity of recorded images of the events²¹ facilitated state censorship and denials of violence in ways that would not have been possible in 2005 (as is evident in the coverage of the riots that broke out that year in French cities and their outskirts – riots that prompted President Jacques Chirac's cabinet to revive state-of-emergency powers, including the imposition of curfews, not in use since the Algerian War). It is difficult to imagine a large-scale demonstration in a major city occurring in the twenty-first century without the ubiquitous presence of the kind of "self-surveillance" that would turn countless anonymous camera eyes onto the actions of the police, precisely because they were taking place in the city's public spaces. The film's opening scene, then, is eerie for all of the reasons that have already been cited – it troubles the boundaries between private and public, it upsets the conventions of spectatorship, it signals an enigma with no clear solution – and for one more: it comes forty-four years too late, filming an empty Paris street when the bodies and screams that filled the city on the night of October 17, 1961, had long since disappeared.

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