

Social Isolation and Communal Paranoia in Surveillance Narrative Films  
Surveillance as an operative network in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Coppola's *The Conversation* and Haneke's

*Caché*

by

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## Abstract

This thesis looks at how surveillance is represented in popular media through the analysis of three films, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), and Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005). As a moving image, film is the quintessential artistic medium for depicting the complexity of visuality, providing a foundation of what it means to look and be looked at. All of these films mark transitional historical periods in which a heightened sense of surveillance among contemporary audiences affects the reading of the films. Instead of detailing the political and economic use of surveillance, I am more concerned with how surveillance operates on an individual, localized level, revealing how our everyday routines unknowingly reflect a larger network of surveillance. I seek to offer a historically-based analysis by exploring how the characters in these three films respond and interact with the dynamics of surveillance and how this exchange reflects social anxieties among contemporary audiences. Throughout this thesis I will demonstrate how these films posit concerns over surveillance that are both attached to the historical context of the film and perennial to surveillance as an everyday practice. Rather than reading the act of looking through a psychoanalytic lens, I am more invested in communal concerns about surveillance: how do people deal and learn to live in a world where there is always a possibility of being watched, particularly within the films' historical contexts? And how do these films evoke anxieties that question the audiences' own urge to watch others?

My chapter on *Rear Window* looks at the undercurrents of McCarthyism suspicion and paranoia in the film, how this affects the notion of community and role of ethics in Jefferies' and Lisa's surveillance. I will continue with the question of ethics in *The Conversation*, examining the intervention of human agency with newly developed surveillance technologies through the antihero, Harry Caul. Finally, I will look at how today's multifaceted surveillance mediates the repercussions of a suppressed colonial past in *Caché*. Instead of offering an all-encompassing survey of surveillance in film, this thesis seeks to use these crucial films as a foundation for analyzing how surveillance narrative films respond to our anxieties of living in an increasingly surveilled world.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

What is so unnerving about the thought of being watched by someone from an unknown location? Why does the simple act of looking --and being looked at-- hold so much power? In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault adopted the model of Jeremy Bentham's panoptic structure and applied it to other institutions, such as the prison system, to demonstrate the disciplinary power of observation. But his model is just one of the many that construct a discourse on surveillance and the power dynamics of the gaze. Although literature and the visual arts (painting, drawing, etc) are able to construct the visual field of the gaze, the act and movement of looking is most viscerally present in film. As a moving image, film is the quintessential artistic medium for depicting the complexity of visuality, providing a foundation of what it means to look and be looked at. In film theory, the idea of the gaze has often been associated with voyeurism and psychoanalytic implications. Film theorists have looked to the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud in order to provide a theoretical framework for the gaze.

However, what has been often ignored in relation to looking or the gaze in films is surveillance. We tend to associate the concept of surveillance to governmental actions, especially in the post-9/11 protection against future terrorist attacks through the creation of Homeland Security. Surveillance has also been linked to an economic basis, established by Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodernism, which cites surveillance as a crucial element in late consumer or multinational capitalism. Although surveillance has particular importance in the political and economic spheres, surveillance also has strong cultural and social resonances in the everyday. Rather than detailing the political and economic use of surveillance, I am more concerned with how surveillance operates on a more localized level and how our everyday

routines unknowingly reflect a larger network of surveillance. This thesis looks at how surveillance is represented in popular media through the analysis of three films that mark transitional historical periods in which a heightened sense of surveillance among contemporary audiences affects the reading of the films. These films are Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) and Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005).

Surveillance is a part of our everyday lives. It is so instilled in our society that it becomes an invisible complex, something that is so common yet pervasive that we forget it is there. Various forms of surveillance technologies permeate almost all aspects of our lives: surveillance camera in gas stations and apartment buildings, on streets and intersections, or the censorship of internet activity, to mention a few. Surveillance studies is a relatively new mode of theory which attempt to analyze this complex, and by looking at these films through the lens surveillance theory, we can see how they expose, interrogate, and deconstruct the invisible yet pervasive power of surveillance. By looking at how the characters in the narratives react to and interact with surveillance, how surveillance operates in the film and at how these films speak to their contemporary historical contexts, I intend to offer a historically-based analysis of these films. This thesis explores how these characters pose very real questions about surveillance, and how these concerns over surveillance are both attached to the historical context of the film and perennial to surveillance as an everyday practice. Rather than examining the act of looking in these films through a psychoanalytic approach, I am more interested in examining the communal concerns about surveillance: how do people deal and learn to live in a world where there is always a possibility of being watched? And how do these negotiations relate to the films' historical contexts?

With continuing advances in surveillance technologies expanding into the digital age, surveillance theory has also gained more groundwork and prominence since Foucault's discussion of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). The word "surveillance" is rooted in the French verb, *surveiller*, which literally means to 'watch over' (Lyon, *Surveillance Studies*, 13). Although surveillance is pervasive in our society, providing a single all-encompassing definition of its complexity and ambiguity is challenging. However, a few key defining aspects of surveillance will be relevant in the analysis of the three selected films. David Lyon's *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*, which I will refer to throughout this thesis, provides a survey of surveillance theories mostly rooted in sociological discourse, from Foucault to present. Although Lyon's book is rooted in sociology, his terms and concepts are easily adaptable to other disciplines, including cultural and film studies. In most basic terms, surveillance "refers to processes in which special note is taken of certain human behaviours that go well beyond idle curiosity" (Lyon 13). In more specific terms "it is the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction" (Lyon 14). By focused, Lyon means that "surveillance directs its attention in the end to individuals" (Lyon 14). It is systematic in that "it is deliberate and depends on certain protocols and techniques" (Lyon 14). Lastly, it is routine because "it occurs as a 'normal' part of everyday life in all societies that depend on bureaucratic administration and some kinds of information technology" (Lyon 14). When defined as the "focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details," surveillance is clearly at work in the narratives of these films. Although this definition provides a broad notion of surveillance, my thesis intends to look beyond this definition in order to consider the intervening factors of human agency, advances in technology and the role of ethics in order to comprehend its complexity. Technology, too, greatly alters the role and effect of surveillance. In

today's digital age, surveillance is almost automatically associated with the use of information technology. While it is true that "digital devices only increase the capacities of surveillance or, sometimes, help to foster particular kinds of surveillance or help to alter its character," Lyon reminds us that "surveillance also occurs in down-to-earth, face-to-face ways" (Lyon 15). This thesis will cover both face-to-face surveillance and that which is technologically-facilitated; it will also suggest that a tension that exists between them. Another defining feature of surveillance is "that surveillance is always hinged to some specific purpose" (Lyon 15). It can only exist with a motive. The main protagonists in these films, whether surveillers, subjects of surveillance or both, demonstrate this need for a motive. The following chapters, each dedicated to a single film, will look at what motivates surveillance in the film and the ethical implications are behind these motivations. By accounting for human agency and the ways humans react and respond to surveillance in *Rear Window*, *The Conversation* and *Caché*, my analyses will show that the characters' responses are symptomatic of communal paranoia and isolation, caused in part by social anxieties in play at the time of the films' release. By relating the experiences of the characters within these films to outer factors of historical and social events or transformations, this thesis explores how surveillance is portrayed in relation to its historical contexts.

*Rear Window*, *The Conversation* and *Caché* all present narratives that emphasize the role of looking or hearing as a means to unravel a mystery. In *Rear Window*, L.B. Jefferies (James Stewart) is a wheelchair-bound photojournalist who suspects a neighbor of murder and uses his camera and binocular lens to attempt to prove his suspicion. *The Conversation* features Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), a surveillance expert who unknowingly becomes involved in a murder plot he believes to be targeting the subjects of his surveillance and who consequently attempts to prevent the crime. Lastly, *Caché* focuses on Georges (Daniel Auteuil) and Anne Laurent (Juliette

Binoche), a married bourgeois couple who is terrorized by anonymous surveillance tapes of their personal lives. Beyond their related although varying narratives, what also connects these films are their historical contexts. Although the narratives of these films do not directly address the historical contexts in which they were produced, they do have important historical and social resonances. All of these films were released at times of historical significance, made all the more acute to our concerns by their relation to surveillance. For *Rear Window*, the 1950s marked the height of McCarthyism. The year *The Conversation* was released, 1974, was the year of President Nixon's resignation after the Watergate scandal in 1972. *Caché*, although a less definite pivotal moment, represents the age of post-9/11 paranoia coinciding with the rise of digital technologies and their capacities to reveal information. These three films use surveillance as a theme in order to speak to larger historical and social forces at work. All of these films also gained notable critical attention when released. *Rear Window* was nominated for four Oscars, including Best Cinematography, Best Director, Best Sound and Best Screenplay ("Rear Window - Cast, Drew, Director and Awards"). Similarly, *The Conversation* was nominated for Best Picture, Best Sound and Best Original Screenplay and won the Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival. *Caché* was nominated for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards and also won Best Director and nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival. These films were received as critically important, regarded as emblems of film history.

By exploring these films through the lens of surveillance, each looks to the collective memory of the contemporary audience. These films are not apolitical or packaged media products void of social commentary. Instead, their narratives and film techniques voice the communal concerns and anxieties of their audiences. Although these films do not explicitly

react to their political or social periods, each film demonstrates an acute awareness and response to the contemporary social and historical turmoil.

## CHAPTER I: *Rear Window*

### i. Introduction

For audiences, critics, and theorists, Hitchcock's masterpiece *Rear Window* (1954) is a quintessential example of voyeurism, "a reflexive meditation on what it means to watch, both personally and on a social level" (Zimmer 435). The narrative and formal techniques that Hitchcock employs in the film also foreground the theme of surveillance as a way to contemplate the role of cinema itself as a form of social observation and reflection. Although the film has elicited psychoanalytic readings by film theorists such as feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, a solely psychoanalytic look at *Rear Window* detracts from the historical relevance in the film, as I will explain in the next section. By looking at *Rear Window* as a surveillance narrative, the film presents the technique of surveillance as fostering a type of voyeurism that flourishes progressively in the paranoid, disconnected world of post-World War II American society. Although *Rear Window* is deemed as the quintessential film about voyeurism, I would argue that a reading of surveillance in *Rear Window*, in some ways, speaks to the contemporary communal suspicion and paranoia among its audiences. Through this reading, we can see how the film questions the notion of community and neighborhood in a time when one was always suspicious of another's actions. This chapter seeks to untangle the complexity of the relationships among McCarthyism, community, and the question of what came to be called "rear window ethics."

The film is narrated through the point of view of L.B. 'Jeff' Jefferies (James Stewart), an adventure-seeking, romantically-inept photojournalist. Throughout the film, Jefferies is wheelchair-bound as a result of a work-related accident in which he was run over while photographing a racecar. While confined to his Greenwich Village apartment, the only source of entertainment he finds is watching the activities of his neighbors across the courtyard of his

apartment building. Rather than commit to his girlfriend Lisa Carol Fremont (Grace Kelly), whom he deems "too perfect," he prefers to watch the lives of his neighbors as they play out before him in the windows of their apartments. What begins as a petty curiosity with the lives of his neighbors turns into a murder plot in which Jefferies suspects his neighbor, Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr), of the murder of his wife, Mrs. Emma Thorwald (Irene Winston).

## **ii. Theoretical approaches to *Rear Window*: Voyeurism and Surveillance**

*Rear Window* is film that deals with both voyeurism and surveillance. Although the terms surveillance and voyeurism at times overlap with one another, they both have distinctive qualities. Both terms involve the use of visuality or audibility as a means to derive private information from individuals; as such they present two overlapping yet distinct approaches to analyze the film. In an analysis of *Rear Window* that focuses on the first of these qualities, film critic Robert Stam explores the "sexual politics of looking" where "Jeffries' [sic] voyeurism goes hand in hand with an absorbing fear of mature sexuality" (Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 54). Through a psychoanalytic lens applied to Jefferies' voyeurism, "both the broken leg and the smashed camera can be seen, in the context of the film as a whole, as intimations of a fear of castration or impotence" (Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 49). Jefferies' resistance to commitment with Liza only furthers this argument for a psychoanalytic reading of Jefferies' voyeurism. To Stam, "Jeffries [sic], symptomatically, is bored by (the) spectacle of consummation" (Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 49) shown through window of the newly wedded couple. He prefers "either exhibitionism (Miss Torso) or the morbid concatenation of marriage and violence (the murder of Mrs. Thorwald). Although Lisa is more than willing to go to bed [with him], Jeff prefers to fall asleep with his binoculars. Voyeurism,

passivity, and implied impotence are shown to form a melancholy constellation of mutually reinforcing neuroses" (Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 49). Thus, a voyeuristic reading of the film tends to revolve around psychosexual anxieties of Jeffries rather than the social and historically prevalent forces at work that I will explore in this chapter.

Feminist film critics have also explored a psychoanalytic approach to reading voyeurism in film as well, including Laura Mulvey, in defining female spectatorship. In her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues that the spectator is forced to align with the male gaze in classical narrative cinema. Although she does not directly discuss *Rear Window* in her essay, her theories on the male gaze in Hitchcock's other films, such as *Vertigo* (1958) and *Marnie* (1964), are easily transferrable to the Jefferies' voyeurism. The female provides visual pleasure for the male spectator but also presents a castration threat, which the male viewer circumvents through sadistic voyeurism or fetishistic scopophilia. As a voyeur, Jeffries seeks sexual gratification through seeing rather than directing his attention toward his physically available girlfriend, Liza. Viewing *Rear Window* as a film about voyeurism evokes a dominantly psychoanalytic analysis of Jeffries' obsessive voyeuristic desires.

Although much of the discourse on *Rear Window* surrounds voyeurism, this thesis looks at another theoretical approach to *Rear Window*: surveillance. As a surveillance film, *Rear Window* renders Jeffries' monitoring vision as a central instrument in a culture of observation and judgment. The setup of Jeffries' apartment building can be compared to the Foucaultian model of panopticon, an archetypal model for surveillance studies. Stam, in addition to his voyeuristic reading of *Rear Window*, recognizes the film's strong affiliation with surveillance when he argues that "(Jeffries) is the warden, as it were, in a private panopticon. Seated in his central tower, he observes the wards ('small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery') in an

imaginary prison" (Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 48). Although the model of Jeffries' apartment can operate as a physical embodiment of the panopticon model, Jeffries' neighbors do not indicate any knowledge of Jeffries' lens or sight, with the exception of Mr. Thorwald later in the film. The power relations of Foucault's model of panopticon depend on the prisoners' awareness of the warden as they constantly remain subject to the omnipresent supervision of the tower. Rather than portraying a community dominated by power relations implied by Foucault's theory, as Stam suggests, *Rear Window* reflects the growing social disconnection in post-World War II urban society, shown through the dynamics of Jeffries' apartment complex.

Instead of collapsing *Rear Window* to a reading in terms of a panoptic structure, a more general reading of surveillance allows the film to define surveillance in its own terms, exposing how the film reflects these contemporary issues of social alienation. As opposed to voyeurism, which discerns the individual subject as a site of perversion who seeks sexual gratification through looking, surveillance refers not only to the individual subject but also to the social community seeking out an individual's pathological perversions. As Lyon points out, surveillance is "routine," a "'normal' part of the everyday life" (Lyon, *Surveillance Studies*, 14), which what makes it so unnerving. While analyses of Jeffries as a voyeur provide a psychoanalytic reading of gender relations and sexuality in the film, I would argue that a reading of Jeffries as the vehicle for surveillance engages broader social forces at work in the film, including a reconsideration of ethics and the role of community in the environment of McCarthy-era suspicion.

The opening scene of *Rear Window* establishes surveillance as a force that operates not only upon Jeffries' neighbors but also on Jeffries himself. During the opening credits, Hitchcock

establishes himself, not Jefferies, as the driving force of the narrative and meditates on the role of the audience in the narrative, identifying the audience as a voyeur like Jefferies. The beginning shot features the window of Jefferies' apartment. As the beginning credits roll, a series of three blinds, side-by-side, raise one after another, revealing the courtyard view of Jefferies' apartment. Resembling theatre curtains being drawn up for a play, this shot draws attention to the construction of the narrative as a spectacle, made for the entertainment of audiences. Hitchcock presents his film in this fashion not only to self-reflectively mediate on spectatorship, voyeurism and surveillance, but also to blur the distinction between Jefferies as the protagonist who controls the point of view of the narrative and the audience who sees the story unfold in front of us, without Jefferies' as the mediator.

After the opening credits, the camera proceeds to travel outside of the window of Jefferies' apartment, taking on a life of its own. In a long panning shot, the camera slowly surveys the courtyard, the stage of the narrative for Jefferies' and the audiences' entertainment. Instead of aligning with Jefferies' gaze, the camera returns to depict Jefferies' apartment, where he sweats in the summer heat. The camera cuts to the thermometer, reading ninety-four degrees, then pans to the Songwriter (Ross Bagdasarian), one of Jefferies' tenants. As he is shaving, the Songwriter switches off the anti-aging radio advertisement playing in his apartment. An alarm goes off and the camera cuts to a couple (Sara Berner and Frank Cady) sleeping outside of their apartment on the fire escape. The camera then pans to the apartment of the ballet dancer Miss Torso (Georgine Darcy), which lies across from Jefferies' apartment. She casually bends to pick up and refasten her bra before she continues to practice her acrobatic dance moves while she prepares breakfast. The camera glosses over other windows of tenants before it returns to

Jefferies' apartment where he sleeps. All of these vignettes reveal the various characters that Jeffries later watches from his apartment.

The camera moves back into Jefferies' apartment, where he is still sleeping. The camera follows his body to reveal the cast on his leg, reading "Here lie the broken bones of L.B. Jefferies." The camera zooms out to a full body shot of Jefferies then pans to show a broken camera, split in two, photographs of a car race crash and other explosions, cameras and photography equipment (which he later uses to observe his neighbors) and finally a framed negative of a blond woman. The camera then features the processed photo of the woman, displayed on the cover of a magazine titled "Paris Fashions." Just as the camera provides insight into the lives of the various apartment building tenants, the camera surveys Jefferies' life through sight. Hitchcock's camera reveals Jefferies' own obsession with visuality and visual documentation through surveillance techniques before the camera assumes Jefferies' point of view. In this scene, Hitchcock's camera acts as an instrument of surveillance, with Jefferies as the object. As he sleeps, the camera runs its' gaze along Jefferies' body and the objects related to his visual interests: his photographic work and his cameras, which are later used as surveillance apparatuses. In the following scenes, the camera assumes the subjective gaze of Jefferies with two exceptions, which I will discuss later on in this chapter. However, this opening scene represents the vulnerability of all the characters in *Rear Window* to the surveillance of the camera, whether it is Hitchcock's lens or Jefferies.'

### **iii. *Rear Window* and the role of community under McCarthyism**

The theme of surveillance in *Rear Window* has particular resonance in the historical context of the film's release in 1954. McCarthyism, characterized by anti-communist

persecutions, reached its height in the 1950s. Surveillance became a dominant mode of detecting alleged Communists and surveillance mostly targeted liberals.<sup>1</sup> At this time, a "series of repressive legislative acts that established the national security state authorized the appropriation of the cinematic apparatus and its technology for internal security purposes" (Corber, *Rear Window and the Postwar Settlement*, 127). Jefferies' use of surveillance methods, namely his camera and binoculars, aligns him with the type of surveillance that defined McCarthyism. Although the connection between surveillance and the historical context of McCarthyism is clear, my intention is not to dwell in a strictly political reading of *Rear Window*. Instead, I wish to delineate how *Rear Window* serves to present social alienation in post-war America, of which McCarthyism was a part. I will begin with an analysis of an opening scene of the film, which visually connects Jefferies to a larger network of surveillance. I will then discuss political readings of *Rear Window*, such as Robert Corber's essay "Resisting History: *Rear Window* and the Limits of the Postwar Settlement," which views *Rear Window* as a critique of McCarthyism. From there, I will move on to critics, such as Armond White and Robert Stam, who take on a broader social approach in interpreting select aspects of the film. Ultimately, through a close reading of community interactions in *Rear Window*, I will expand on the theories of White and Stam, in showing how Jefferies' surveillance reflects the social alienation that exists in the apartment complex but also how Jefferies' relentless surveillance of Thorwald, the embodiment of urban suspicion, results (and problematically so) in Thorwald's arrest and social harmony.

Although the narrative of *Rear Window* unfolds within the confines of Jefferies' apartment complex, the connection between Jefferies and larger networks of surveillance is

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<sup>1</sup> Hollywood was a main target of anti-communist blacklisting. Although the relation between Hollywood and McCarthyism has particular importance if one views *Rear Window* as a critique of McCarthyism, my objective is to concentrate more on the broader social effects of community alienation in the film.

established in one of the opening scenes. Stranded in his wheelchair with one broken leg, Jefferies answers the phone. It's his magazine editor calling to celebrate the removal of Jeffries' cast. As Jefferies corrects him that the cast will be removed the following week, he sits in his wheelchair, facing the window. He watches two women open the door to the rooftop across the courtyard. As the women sit down, a wall obstructs the view of them yet Jefferies sees their bathrobes thrown over the railing as they lay down to sunbathe. The camera cuts back to Jefferies' reaction shot as he looks a little higher to see a helicopter hovering over the sunbathing beauties. Despite the restrictions of Jefferies' view from his apartment, the helicopter above represents the larger mechanism of surveillance operating outside of Jefferies' apartment complex and exerting its gaze onto the tenants. Although Jefferies' view of the women sunbathing is limited compared to helicopter's aerial view, they share the same subject, connecting Jefferies to a larger system of surveillance. Although its origins or purpose is unknown, the helicopter represents an anonymous, overarching gaze infiltrating into the complex. Jefferies' surveillance, while less ominous, exerts a similar power over his neighbors. This opening scene acknowledges the outer forces of surveillance that are not limited to the confines of the courtyard, indicating the prevailing, omnipresent network of surveillance that operates outside the control of the characters, including Jefferies.

Until recently, Hitchcock's films have often been interpreted as apolitical, "as transcendent masterpieces, as 'pure cinema'" (White 119). In his essay, "Eternal Vigilance in *Rear Window*," Armond White's political reading of *Rear Window* splits from "major studies of the director by Robin Wood, Francois Truffaut, and Donald Spoto (which) treat Hitchcock as transcendent artist" (White, 139). Parting from the predominantly psychoanalytic analysis of Hitchcock's films, critics like White and Robert J. Corber have analyzed *Rear Window* and its

historical ties to a culture of surveillance. In the context of "the scopic regime of the national security state," Corber views voyeurism as a "surveillance practice" in which Jefferies' "voyeuristic practices are rooted in the establishment of a national security apparatus that legitimated the use of the camera for intruding on the privacy of others" (Corber, *Rear Window and the Postwar Settlement*, 139). In Corber's analysis, Jefferies' constant surveillance collapses of the private and the public; "in the context of the McCarthy witch hunts, [Jefferies'] surveillance of his neighbors' activities is a political act. [...] He fails to understand that his identity as a neighbor is in direct conflict with his identity as a citizen" (Corber, *Rear Window and the Postwar Settlement*, 143). For Corber, Jefferies' conflict is grounded in the dichotomy between his identification with his community and his acts of surveillance, associated with McCarthyism.

Although Corber provides an important connection between the historical context of McCarthyism and Jefferies' position as a spectator, he defines surveillance in solely political terms. However, where Corber renders Jefferies' surveillance solely in terms of his identity as a citizen in the midst of McCarthy witch-hunts, I would argue that *Rear Window* is not necessarily a critique of McCarthyism and "the government persecution of suspected Communists, homosexuals, and lesbians" (Corber, *Rear Window and the Postwar Settlement*, 139). Instead, *Rear Window* reflects a communal awareness of a social alienation, generated by suspicions among neighbors. On a national level, such suspicion results in McCarthyism, but cannot be solely reduced to it. Although Corber's distinction between Jefferies' role as a citizen versus his role as a neighbor is an important one, I would not restrict Jefferies' surveillance to political motivations as a citizen.

By looking at *Rear Window* as a film about community in postwar America, we can see the relationship between Jefferies and his neighbors, mediated almost solely through surveillance as reflecting the social alienation of the time. Stam, who adopts a predominantly psychoanalytic reading of *Rear Window*, also cites the "political dimension" (Stam *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 53) of the film. Stam touches on the social aspect of "McCarthyite anticomunism": "McCarthyism (...) is the antithesis of neighborliness; it treats every neighbor as a potential other, alien, spy. It fractures the social community for purposes of control" (Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 53). I agree that *Rear Window* provides a snapshot of social alienation and suspicion in 1950s urban American society. Jefferies' lens exploits the environment of paranoia yet his lens is also symptomatic of this culture of suspicion. Thorwald acts as the embodiment of the deviant "other," representative of the persecuted during the McCarthyism. Although Jefferies fails to adequately identify with his neighbors on an emotional level, Lisa, who also sees what Jefferies sees, does. With Lisa as Jefferies' auxiliary human lens, they are able to confirm how Thorwald's suspicious behavior deviates from the community of the apartment complex. However, Hitchcock does not glorify surveillance. Rather, Jefferies' excessive surveilling tactics create an ambiguous portrayal of surveillance as a means to eliminate the character who imposes danger on the community but also as creepily invasive force exercised by Jefferies.

In the social context of the film's production, Hitchcock's *Rear Window* demonstrates the growing suspicion among fellow citizens, eventuating in but not limited to McCarthyism, but also meditates on "issues of individual survival in the modern world – to how citizens cope with the difficult or dehumanizing structures of social life" (White 119). Jefferies' apartment complex exhibits how the lives of his neighbors are understood through observation, not conversation. He only watches them from a distance, naming them according to what he perceives through sight:

Miss Torso, the highly sexualized dancer; Miss Lonelyhearts, a depressed spinster desperate for a man's affection; the Songwriter, a musician in the midst of a writers block; the Newlyweds who constantly stay behind their blinds. All of the labels Jefferies creates derive from his distanced observations of their behaviors and appearance. After Lieutenant Doyle (Wendell Corey) dismisses Lisa's and Jefferies' accusations of Mrs. Thorwald's murder, Lisa and Jefferies sulk in disappointment that their suspicions were not confirmed. After Doyle leaves, Jefferies is left questioning his own "rear window ethics" when observing his neighbors in a crucial point in the film, which I will expand on in the next section. Lisa draws attention to a lack of a sense of neighborliness: she asks, "what ever happened to that old saying 'love thy neighbor?'" Both Lisa's recognition of the lost communal bonds between neighbors and Jefferies' function as an agent of surveillance embody the social alienation that McCarthyism is a part of.

In the few scenes of community engagement, the film contemplates the social urban alienation that Jefferies' scrutiny reveals. However, Thorwald's dismissal of community exposes his own guilt, renewing Jefferies' pursuit to uncover Thorwald's crime through surveillance. After Doyle leaves, Lisa and Jefferies resolve to give up their inquisition of Thorwald. Lisa pulls down the blinds, saying "the show's over for tonight." Until this point, their surveillance of Jefferies' neighbors serves as entertainment, "a show" as Lisa calls it, not a politically charged persecution. Lisa is changing into her nightgown to show off to Jefferies, when a scream comes from the courtyard. Lisa immediately opens the blinds and Jefferies turns toward the window. The wife of the couple sleeping on the fire escape (Sara Berner) sobs and all the tenants emerge from their apartments to see what is wrong. Miss Lonelyhearts walks into the courtyard toward the lifeless dog, announcing that he has been strangled to death. The wife desperately yells "Which one of you did it? Which one of you killed my dog?" As the wife asks this, the camera

cuts to an overall view of the courtyard that departs from Jefferies' viewpoint. By providing a neutral yet revealing perspective of the courtyard, the camera shifts Jefferies from his all-seeing position in his apartment to a position within the community of the apartment complex.

The recognition of social alienation in the apartment complex becomes explicit in this scene when the wife of the couple on the fire escape talks about the definition of *neighbor*. The camera cuts to the different tenants as the wife exclaims, "you don't know the meaning of the word *neighbor*. Neighbors like each other, speak to each other, care if anybody lives or dies but none of you do." Unlike the scenes where the image of the tenants is shown through Jefferies' camera or perspective, this scene separates itself from Jefferies' perspective by showing close-ups of Miss Torso, Miss Lonelyhearts, the Newlyweds and a low shot of the couple on the fire escape as they mourn their dog's death. The camera surveys the apartment complex not from Jefferies' perspective but independent of it. When the wife asks "did you kill him because he liked you? Just because he liked you?" the camera cuts back to the reaction of Lisa and Jefferies. The scene continues to define Jefferies as just another member of the community, not the dominant force of surveillance. This is one of the few scenes in the film that views the community of the apartment complex as a whole, not simply as a series of objects of Jefferies' surveillance. For White, this "unnerving social outburst" of the wife provides "a stunning accusation of the alienation of postwar society" (White 118-119). Although this scene brings the community together, through both narrative and formal techniques, this communion is only as the result of neighborhood suspicion. This alienated yet uniting effect characterizes the community relations in this vacuum of paranoia.

In this scene of community engagement, Thorwald's inability to become a part of the community signals a turning point in the narrative. As the tenants return to their respective

apartments, Jefferies' suspicion of Thorwald is reignited. Jefferies explains to Lisa, "In the whole courtyard only one person didn't come to the window, look" and the camera cuts to their joined view of Thorwald's dark apartment and the faint light of Thorwald's cigar as he inhales. Thorwald's disavowal of community engagement exposes his guilt to Jefferies. Lisa responds, "Why would Thorwald want to kill a little dog? Because it knew too much?"<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Jefferies re-exerts his surveillance onto Thorwald, when he tells Lisa to "look." The following scenes involve Lisa and Jefferies trying to determine what the dog knew and eventually, exposing Thorwald's crime with his camera lens. Although Jefferies' surveillance techniques reflect social alienation, then a political move, his revived investigation of Thorwald leads to his arrest. His surveillance is no longer a form of entertainment but paradoxically, a method to obtain the ideal of urban community within the realm of the apartment complex instead of an instrument that entails social alienation.

For the community reunites again at the climax of the film when Thorwald violates the distance required for Jefferies' surveillance and comes in immediate physical contact with Jefferies. In the sequence preceding this scene, Lisa breaks into Thorwald's apartment to find Mrs. Thorwald's abandoned wedding ring, the key evidence in proving Thorwald's crime. Thorwald unexpectedly comes back and is attacking Lisa when the authorities come. As she talks to the policemen with her back faced to Jefferies, she points to Mrs. Thorwald's wedding ring on her finger. Thorwald, standing next to her, sees Lisa's hand and looks up to see Jefferies across the courtyard. Jefferies moves back into the darkness of his apartment to avoid Thorwald's gaze, but Thorwald's look has already reversed the visual relations created by Jefferies' surveillance. With Jeffries' surveillance detected, the space between Jeffries and Thorwald

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<sup>2</sup> Here, Hitchcock makes an ironic gesture toward the blatant absurdity of the suspicion characterized McCarthyism by insinuating that a "little dog" would know too much.

physically breaks down. Stella (Thelma Ritter), Jefferies' nurse, rushes to bail Lisa out of jail and Jefferies is left alone, vulnerable. When Thorwald enters Jefferies' apartment, Jefferies' only defense is temporarily blinding Thorwald with the flash of his camera bulbs. Thorwald is no longer the distant subject of Jeffries' surveillance. The space created by Jeffries' lens disappears in this climax of physical confrontation.

Not only does the space between Thorwald and Jefferies collapse, the struggle between the two results in a reversal of Jefferies' gaze onto his neighbors. When Lisa returns to Thorwald's apartment with Doyle and his police force, she sees the struggle between Jefferies and Thorwald across the courtyard. As Thorwald forcefully attempts to throw Jefferies out the window, the neighbors come to their windows, some yelling "Look!" As in the dog scene I discussed earlier, Jefferies is the subject of their gaze and his identity as another member of community of the apartment complex is re-established in this scene. The disorienting angles of Jefferies' anguish are cross-cut with a close-up of Miss Lonelyhearts as she looks up to see Jefferies being forced out the window and a close-up of the Newlyweds as they hurry to their window. Doyle and the police force run out to the courtyard, and the camera tilts up to show Jefferies hanging from the edge of his window while Thorwald attempts to throw him out. This is the first time the audience sees Jefferies' apartment from the outside courtyard, as his tenants would see him. Once Thorwald's presence in Jefferies' apartment disrupts the role of Jeffries as the agent of surveillance and Thorwald as the subject of it, Jefferies and the locale of his constantly observing lens are no longer immune to the gaze of his neighbors. Jefferies is now the subject of everyone's gaze. However, their vision is not like Jefferies' inquisitive surveillance. Instead, it incites action. The attention brought to Jefferies' struggle through the sight of his neighbors alters the role of surveillance by provoking action. The joint communities of the

apartment complex and the police force actively attempt to save Jefferies rather than just watch. The police race toward the struggle. Two policemen grab Thorwald, but before they can reach Jefferies, he falls from the window and hits the ground, still alive. Doyle, Lisa and Stella hurry toward him, as the other tenants watch in concern in the background. Thus, his neighbors' attention replaces Jefferies' individualized surveillance with a new type of communal surveillance. The communal experience of seeing this confrontation leads to Thorwald's arrest and confession. This scene ultimately facilitates reconciliation and eliminates the need for surveillance as a means to communicate with others. However, as I will discuss in the following section, Hitchcock disrupts the interpretation of surveillance as purely a means to achieve social harmony when the question of "rear window ethics" comes into the picture, which I will discuss in the next section.

The ending scene solidifies the notion of communal harmony with the elimination of Thorwald. It echoes the beginning sequence in its camera movement sweeping over the courtyard. The scene cuts to a thermostat reading seventy-one degrees. The environment of the apartment complex returns to natural temperatures after the heat wave that occupies the majority of the film. The camera then pans to the songwriter's apartment, where he plays the first release of his song to Miss Lonelyhearts. She tells him "I can't tell you what this music has meant to me" as she sits down to listen to it. The camera then pans over to Mr. Thorwald's former apartment where painters apply a new coat of white paint on the walls. The wife of the couple on the fire escape trains her new puppy to stay still in the basket as she lowers it down to the courtyard. Miss Torso stops dancing to open the door to her true beloved, a short, stocky Army man named Stanley. The wife of the Newlyweds chastises her husband for not telling her he quit his job. After Thorwald is removed from the apartment complex, the community's affairs resolve in

harmony. Miss Torso no longer has to entertain older, wealthy men in the absence of her true love; Miss Lonelyhearts finds love with the Songwriter, who is no longer plagued by writers' block; the couple on the fire escape have a new dog to keep them company. The camera eventually comes to Jefferies, smiling while he sleeps with both of his legs in casts. The camera pans over to Lisa. As opposed to the formal, expensive and mostly high-end designer attire she wears throughout the film, Lisa wears jeans and an oxford while reading Beyond the High Himalayas, a clear attempt to relate to Jefferies' interests. After looking up to see Jeffries sleeping, she puts down the book to pick up Bazaar Magazine. The ending scene reflects the communal bonds that are either reconciled or created after Thorwald's dismissal from sphere of the apartment complex. One of these bonds includes Jefferies and Lisa. Their ability to compromise for each other's interests reconciles their relationship. The film ends with a shot of Lisa, validating her agency throughout the narrative. Despite the promising ending, *Rear Window* also calls attention to the more sinister, problematic quality of surveillance. Although Lisa and Jefferies' surveillance aims to expose Thorwald, the symbol of perversion and aberrant behavior in the film, Hitchcock complicates the possibility of an ethical surveillance.

#### **iv. Ethics, Gender and Surveillance in *Rear Window***

"I'm not much on rear window ethics" - Lisa (Grace Kelly)

While most readings of *Rear Window* argue that the spectator identifies with Jefferies as the main protagonist,<sup>3</sup> some recent theorists contend with this view, arguing that Lisa shares

<sup>3</sup> Laura Mulvey makes this point in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where she argues that the female spectator is denied visual pleasure because classical Hollywood cinema aligns the camera with the male protagonists' gaze. Other theorists such as Robert Stam analyze the film as almost solely through Jefferies' perspective.

Jefferies' view of the courtyard.<sup>4</sup> In agreeing with the latter, I would argue that there are times when the women in Jefferies' apartment see, both visually and emotionally, more than Jefferies himself. Jefferies' surveillance begins with a voyeuristic premise, which limits his identification with his neighbors. Lisa's surveillance and her exterior knowledge, her "female intuition" that Doyle scoffs at, complement Jefferies' surveillance and become pivotal in solving the case. By looking at how Lisa's surveillance complements and at times surpasses Jefferies' gaze, we can see that *Rear Window* offers a multilayered structure of gender roles. So what does it mean when Jefferies reflects on the ethics of his invasive sight and Lisa says only "I'm not much on rear window ethics"? Although Lisa's empathetic identification with the neighbors counteracts Jefferies' voyeuristic subjection, her actions and motives negate an interpretation of her surveillance as "ethical." Although Lisa's and Jefferies' surveillance ultimately results in the elimination of Thorwald and community harmony within the apartment complex, Hitchcock denies a reading of a purely "ethical" surveillance.

Although the practice of his look is surveillance, Jefferies' gaze is initially voyeuristic in nature. He displays his voyeuristic tendencies when he dubs the agile, attractive, sexually suggestive dancer who lives across the courtyard as "Miss Torso." Even the name connotes the sexual undertone of his attention toward her. He verbally dismembers her, identifying her as a body part. Stella, Jefferies' nurse, constantly draws attention to Jefferies' voyeuristic nature, calling him a "Peeping Tom," "a window shopper." After the opening sequence, Jefferies watches the various vignettes of the apartment complex during his conversation with his editor. When he hangs up the phone, he grabs a long wooden stick to scratch his leg underneath his cast.

<sup>4</sup> Tania Modleski details Lisa's agency in her essay "The Master's Dollhouse: *Rear Window*" where she advocates for the power of Lisa's feminine desire and of her gaze. I will refer to this essay throughout this section.

This self-gratifying act alludes to masturbation, indicating the pleasure he derives from watching his neighbors. As other theorists have pointed out, this theme echoes throughout the first part of the film, beginning with "the first image of [Jefferies], aspeep [sic] with hand on thigh, [which] is quietly masturbatory, as if he were an invalid abusing himself in the dark" (Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 49). Jefferies' gaze loses its voyeuristic elements when Jefferies adamantly pursues Thorwald through his surveillance. As noted in the previous section, his surveillance turns from mere entertainment into his persecution of Thorwald. However his voyeuristic tendencies prevent him from the "feminine intuition" that Lisa offers through her identification with the neighbors.

When Lisa is introduced in the narrative, she displays her connection with the neighbors before she participates in Jefferies' persecution of Thorwald. Modleski notes this difference between Lisa's and Jefferies' surveillance when she explains, "from the outset, Lisa is less interested than Jeff in spying on the neighbors and adopting a transcendent and controlling relation to the text of their lives; rather she relates to the 'characters' through empathy and identification" (Modleski, "The Master's Dollhouse: *Rear Window*" 730). As Lisa sets up dinner in the kitchen, Jefferies looks out to see Miss Lonelyhearts, setting the table for two. Imagining a suitor coming to have dinner with her, Miss Lonelyhearts plays out her fantasy: answering the door, showing her imaginary suitor to the table, pouring two glasses of wine. When Miss Lonelyhearts holds up her glass to toast, Jefferies reciprocates and takes a sip. Jefferies displays a hint of compassion, yet he still lacks insight into her despair. His inability to truly "see" his neighbors as Lisa does is also apparent later in the film, when Miss Lonelyhearts lays out a pile of sleeping pills and Jefferies is oblivious to her suicidal intentions. Miss Lonelyhearts collapses in her seat and the facade begins to crumble. As she sobs, Jefferies labels her "Miss

"Lonelyhearts" for the first time. The camera cuts to the reaction shot, but this time the frame includes Jefferies *and* Lisa. How much Lisa sees is unclear but what is clear is Lisa's empathy, evident in her sympathetic, almost pitying look. Jefferies turns to Lisa and says "Well at least that's something that you'll never have to worry about." Lisa looks to Jeff and says "oh, you can see my apartment from here, all the way up on 63rd street?" Despite Lisa's perfection and endless efforts, Jefferies cannot bring himself to commit to marriage. Lisa's actions echo Miss Lonelyhearts'; they both prepare dinner for a man, imaginary or not, who is not fully present, physically or emotionally. Her identification with the neighbors allows her insight into their psychology that Jefferies cannot access.

Lisa's empathetic identification exceeds Jeffries' attempts to understand his neighbors. After the Miss Lonelyhearts episode, Jefferies shifts his attention to Miss Torso, who is entertaining a group of older, wealthy men. Jefferies points out, "we have a little apartment here that's probably about as popular as yours." While Jefferies interprets Miss Torso as "a queen bee with her pick of the drones," Lisa dissents from this interpretation: "I'd say she's doing a woman's hardest job: juggling wolves." After Miss Torso kisses one of them, Jefferies determines that "she picked the most prosperous-looking one." However, Lisa knows better: "she's not in love with him or any of them." Oblivious, Jefferies asks "how can you tell that from here?" Lisa wittily replies "you said it resembled my apartment didn't you?" Jefferies shifts his eyes toward Lisa, but she returns to the kitchen. Jefferies' perception is tainted by voyeuristic pleasures, and as a result, he is unable to really "see" the neighbors as Lisa can. Lisa not only relates to the despair of Miss Lonelyhearts but she also sees through Miss Torso's performance for her suitors. At the end of the film, Miss Torso's true love, Stanley, comes home from the army and Lisa's intuition is proven right. Her insight surpasses Jefferies' attempts to classify and understand his

neighbors, especially women.

Unlike Jefferies, Lisa's surveillance does not require the use of an apparatus to prove that Thorwald is guilty. According to Stam's voyeuristic reading of the film, "only (Jefferies), generally, is allowed to look through the phallic telephoto lens" (Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* 54). Jefferies' privileged view through his lens is particularly evident when Jefferies tries to prove Thorwald's guilt in the flowerbed scene. As Stella, Lisa and Jefferies watch Thorwald wash down the bathroom walls, Jefferies asks Lisa to grab his slides and slide viewer. As he compares his view of the flowerbed with a slide of the flowerbed taken two weeks earlier, he concludes "If I'm right, I think I've solved a murder." When Lisa looks through the viewer she sees only a picture of the backyard. But Jefferies insists on "one important change": the two yellow zinnias are shorter than they were two weeks ago. He concludes that Thorwald must have buried something in the flowerbed. However, when Lisa and Stella dig up the flowerbed in search of evidence, it turns out to be a dead end. Nothing is there. Although at the end the film, Thorwald reveals he did bury something there then removed it, Hitchcock poses the possibility that Jefferies' lens might not produce sound evidence. Jefferies is convinced that he "solved a murder," but his apparatus isn't enough. While Lisa fails to see the difference Jefferies records through his apparatus, her approach to surveillance turns out to be more valuable. Throughout the film "Lisa and Jeff have very different interpretations about the woman's desire (...), and it is *Lisa's* interpretation, arrived at through identification, that is ultimately validated" (Modleski, "The Master's Dollhouse: *Rear Window*" 731). Although Lisa maintains her humane approach to surveillance, she does so partly in her own self-interest. Her feminine intuition leads to the pursuit of Mrs. Thorwald's abandoned wedding ring, the key to solving the case...and for getting Jefferies.

Although Lisa becomes crucial in solving the case, she is initially resistant to Jefferies' visual obsession with his neighbors. In the beginning of the film, when Jefferies eagerly grabs his binoculars to watch Thorwald return home, Lisa reprimands him: "sitting around looking out of the window on your time is one thing but doing it the way you are with binoculars and wild opinions about everything you see is diseased!" Despite her vehement repulsion at Jefferies' interest in Thorwald, Lisa is gradually seduced into untangling the murder plot, feeding her own desires to catch Thorwald and grow closer to Jefferies. As she becomes more involved, she increasingly uses her "female intuition," as Jefferies' friend Doyle puts it, to supplement Jefferies' suspicions. When Jefferies tells Lisa that Thorwald was taking out jewelry of a small handbag, Lisa responds: "women don't leave their jewelry in a purse getting all twisted and scratched and tangled up [...] and you don't leave it behind in your husband's drawer in your favorite handbag." Later on, Jefferies recalls the jewelry Thorwald took out of the purse, remembering a plain gold band. Convinced, Lisa tells Jefferies that "the last thing Mrs. Thorwald would leave behind would be her wedding ring." Stella ironically adds "The only way anybody could get [my wedding] ring would be to chop off my finger." Determined to find out what was supposedly hidden in the flowerbed, Stella and Lisa venture down to the courtyard before Thorwald returns. Against Jefferies' wishes, Lisa climbs into Thorwald's apartment through the fire escape. She finds Mrs. Thorwald's handbag but empties it with no success. Distracted by the other simultaneous vignettes in the courtyard, Jefferies fails to warn Lisa before Thorwald returns. Thorwald finds her and assaults her, while Jefferies can only watch in pain as she yells out his name. Fortunately, the police come, arresting Lisa and questioning Thorwald. As Jefferies watches, Lisa turns her back to him and points to the wedding ring on her finger. As Francois Truffaut points out, "To (Lisa) that ring is a double victory: not only is it the evidence she was

looking for, but who knows, it may inspire (Jeffries) to propose to her" (Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 223). As Jefferies and Lisa come closer to proving their case, their connection grows stronger. The wedding ring holds a dual role in representing their romance and their pursuit of Thorwald.

When Jefferies questions his own surveillance tactics, he asks "I wonder if it's ethical to watch a man with binoculars and a long focus lens. Do you suppose it's ethical even if you prove that he didn't commit a crime?" This question permeates the film and is never truly answered. The film complicates an ethical reading of Jefferies' surveillance when the objects of his surveillance turn around and attack him. This retribution for his surveillance is apparent at the end of the film when Thorwald pushes Jefferies out of the window. Jefferies also initially broke his leg while trying to capture a photograph of a car race, only to be run over by one of the cars. These attacks define Jefferies' surveillance as overly intrusive. Even though Jefferies exposes wrongdoings, namely Mrs. Thorwald's murder, his surveillance does not go unpunished.

Is Lisa just as unethical as Jefferies? Although Jefferies initially pursues his subjects because of voyeuristic interests, Lisa's identification and empathy with the neighbors provide her with knowledge that exceeds Jefferies', and the film continually proves the validity of Lisa's surveillance. However, we come to realize that Lisa's surveillance is not altruistically motivated. She is also driven by her own desires to further her relationship with Jefferies, epitomized in the dual role of the wedding ring. As the film progresses, Jeffries' speech and expressions make it increasingly apparent that he falls more and more in love with Lisa as they come closer to catching Thorwald. Furthermore, although Lisa's surveillance is more empathic and perhaps to a certain extent more ethical than Jefferies', her actions prove differently. She breaks into an apartment, steals and is arrested. Her actions are anything but ethical. Although Lisa's surveillance goes unpunished, unlike Jefferies who is attacked by the subjects of his surveillance,

I would argue that Hitchcock renders Lisa's surveillance as problematic. Her empathy toward Jefferies' neighbors often masks her self-interests and her unethical actions. Not only does Jefferies demonstrate Hitchcock's problematic attitude towards surveillance, Lisa does too. *Rear Window* oscillates between viewing surveillance as means to punish criminals and exposing it as a method that has more questionable motives and implications. Although Lisa's and Jefferies' actions serve to establish communal harmony at the end the film, Hitchcock questions whether or not their surveillance is ethical or whether surveillance is ever ethical in a community plagued by social alienation.

### **III. *The Conversation***

#### **i. Introduction**

Francis Ford Coppola's revolutionary use of sound and his intuitive sense of contemporary issues, namely the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation, drew both public and critical attention to *The Conversation*, a conspiracy psychological thriller, at the time of its release in 1974. Upon its debut, *The Conversation* received much critical acclaim. The film was nominated for three Oscars (Best Picture, Original Screenplay and Sound) and won a Palme d'Or, awarded to the director of the Best Feature Film of the Official Competition at Cannes Film Festival ("A brief history of the Palme D'Or"). Although critically acclaimed, *The Conversation* received reviews that criticized the narrative for failing to match the film's visual and aural success. For John Dower of *The Washington Post*, "'The Conversation,' Francis Ford Coppola's visually beautiful, aurally striking interestingly conceived movie lost me somewhere along the line" (Dower, B1, *The Washington Post*, 1974). Perhaps this response is due to the fact that Coppola's film is interested less in a clearly linear plot than in what the narrative as a whole says about surveillance: how surveillance, the act itself and the technology involved, simultaneously connects and alienates the characters in the film, and what the consequent moral obligations are. The historical context of *The Conversation* may offer some explanation for the dynamic elements of surveillance in the film. This chapter seeks to explore the contemporary advances of electronic surveillance and the questionable morals that Coppola critiques in a film that presents the increasingly omnipresent power of surveillance.

*The Conversation* is a character study of Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), a specialist in electronic surveillance, known as one of the best in his field. A devout Catholic and jazz lover, Harry lives alone and is resistant to any emotional attachment. The film begins with one of

Harry's assignments, for which he and his operatives record a young couple, Mark (Frederic Forrest) and Ann (Cindy Williams), with several highly advanced electronic surveillance technologies. Parts of their recorded conversation are drowned out by the synthesized noise of the microphones' interference that layer over the diegetic noise of the scene. Harry takes the muddled recording to workshop in an abandoned warehouse the next day. Using his sophisticated equipment, he reconstructs the recording to make it comprehensible. Harry then takes the recording to the office building of his client, the Director (Robert Duvall). Instead of taking the fifteen thousand dollars in compensation, Harry refuses to hand over the recording to the Director's Assistant, Martin Stett (Harrison Ford), insisting on handing it personally to the Director. Stett warns him "don't get involved in this, Mr. Caul. Those tapes are dangerous. You heard them. You know what I mean. Someone may get hurt." Leaving with the tapes, Harry sees Mark and Ann, the subjects of his surveillance, in the office building and grows increasingly suspicious. Harry takes the recording back to his workspace. After repeatedly manipulating the recording, Harry finally reconstructs Mark's last line when he whispers to Ann: "He'd kill us if he got the chance." Harry begins to suspect that the Director, his client, is plotting a murder of the young couple. As he plays the recording over and over again, on his machines and in his head, he attempts to solve the impenetrable case. We later learn that Harry is responsible for three deaths because of his tapes. Despite the persistent probing of his rival, Bernie Moran (Allen Garfield), Harry never reveals how he recorded a presidential nominee's conversation, which exposed a false welfare fund resulting in the deaths of three innocent people. In order to avoid repeating his haunting past, Harry attempts to protect the couple before his client gets to them.

As a conspiracy thriller, *The Conversation* reflects the contemporary relevance of conspiracy at the time of the film's debut. *The Conversation* was released and received

widespread critical acclaim in the wake of political assassinations that shook the country, including those of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in 1968 (Gray, 124) Although these assassinations occurred a few years before the film's release, they remained powerfully present in the collective memory of the audiences. This was true for Coppola, who had developed the story for *The Conversation* beginning in the mid-sixties (Gray 123). Although the film was not inspired by the Watergate Scandal that began in 1972 and ended in 1974 with Nixon's resignation (Gray 123), the film's debut coincided with the widespread crisis that surrounded surveillance. *The Conversation* was one of many examples in popular culture that reflected upon the political and social effects of surveillance: "Reports and/or rumors of electronic espionage as well as assassinations and alleged conspiracies had become the subjects of headlines and film thrillers. These concerns [...] were reflected in Coppola's analysis of irresponsible technical expertise as a source of contemporary despair and declining heroism" (Gray, 123).

Through the main protagonist, Harry, the film meditates on the omnipresent paranoia in American society, discontent with government actions and the potential misuse of surveillance. With Watergate fresh in the minds of audiences, the question of ethics in the practice of surveillance becomes the key question in Coppola's film. As the recording comes back to haunt Harry, the audience perceives the recording, visually and aurally, through Harry's perspective. Mark's line, "he'd kill us if he got the chance," is interpreted only through Harry's limited knowledge, gained through his advanced technology. In the context of the Watergate scandal, recent publicized assassinations, and the consequent paranoia in American society, what is this film saying about surveillance in society? And how does Harry's character mediate this culture? This section looks at Harry as a man who thrives in his profession but fails to accurately interpret

the product of his expertise. Even though Harry repeatedly insists on emotional detachment from his subjects, maintaining his status as one of the "best buggers," he continually looks back at the tapes he has recorded. Taking the historical context into consideration, the film raises ominous questions that plagued contemporary audiences: What are the moral consequences of surveillance? And how does human agency intervene with the supposedly objective forms of surveillance technologies? The question of ethics that Lisa (Grace Kelly) poses in *Rear Window* returns in the 1970s with Harry Caul.

## **ii. Technology and Ethics in *The Conversation***

*The Conversation* portrays the misuse and abuse of contemporary technological advances and demonstrates how powerfully surveillance can manipulate and skew perceptions of reality. Coppola reveals a conscious effort to call attention to the technology presented in the film through both the narrative, which revolves around the volatile tapes, and cinematic approaches that accentuate and foreground Coppola's and Harry's use of technology. This emphasis on technological advances permeates the film, constructing a complex network of surveillance within the narrative, how it is practiced and the consequences it entails. In untangling this complexity, I will first look at how the film's fixation with surveillance technologies reflects contemporary issues at stake in relation to technological trends in the film industry and the political upheaval of 1970s America. Then I will turn to Harry, the anti-hero, and his role within this social context. He is a man who disavows any attachment to the fates of his surveilled victims, yet he is constantly brought back to the tapes. In attempting to unravel Harry's intervention with these "objective" technologies, I will examine how Coppola's construction of perception through visual and aural surveillance complicates a clear identification with Harry

and sheds light on Coppola's agency in the film. By looking at these different aspects of the film, we will gain a better understanding of how to view Harry in his historical and political context. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to decipher Coppola's message about human agency and technology in this deeply introspective and somewhat impenetrable film. What is the moral, if any, of *The Conversation*?

*The Conversation* is one of a group of films that self-reflexively highlights the surge of new technologies in sound recording and mixing in film during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In his article "Citing the Sound," Jay Beck examines this rise in the sound experimentation in films of the 1970s and early 1980s, concentrating on *The Conversation* and Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981): "Directors working within the Hollywood system, such as Martin Scorsese, Arthur Penn, Terence Malick, Monte Hellman, and Francis Ford Coppola, [...] were able to utilize the film soundtrack as an appropriate medium for expanding the dimensions of the narrative" (Beck 158). This increased experimentation with sound recording in film was facilitated by new technologies: "The 1960s saw the introduction of technologies including lightweight Nagra III magnetic tape recorders, smaller lavalier microphones with radio transmitters, graphic equalizers, and multitrack mixing boards, which allowed for film to be reconceptualized and remobilized" (Beck 158). These efforts contributed to larger emerging cinematic styles, such as *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema and the American avant-garde, that sought to deconstruct "seemingly 'transparent' methods of sound and image construction of classical Hollywood studio production" during the late 1960s and 1970s (Beck 158). Coppola, with the help of sound mixer Walter Murch, became one of the prominent directors who took advantage of these new sound technologies. While many previous directors had pursued self-reflective visual approaches to film through "greater use of grainy stock, direct lighting, handheld cameras,

split diopter focus, and the 'realist' aesthetic of lens flares" (Beck 158), sound experimentation was a new method for directors like Coppola to discover new aesthetic possibilities in film.

*The Conversation* was one of the films that epitomized this period of sound experimentation. Throughout *The Conversation*, Coppola is perpetually fixated on Harry's obsession with the tapes and his surveillance technologies. Dubbed "the best bugger on the west coast" by his rival Bernie Moran, Harry is labeled as preeminent in his field by his colleagues. Harry is the master of surveillance technologies that Coppola explicitly foregrounds, shown in the opening Union Square recording scene. Yet Coppola's obsession with Harry extends beyond Harry's capacity to manipulate sound through technology. Rather, he is more interested in the aftermath of this technology and the effects it has on the people who exercise its power and the people who fall victim to it. Through Harry, the anti-hero, Coppola simultaneously portrays a case study of the potential tragedy of surveillance and places Harry within the larger environment of paranoia and isolation in America that *The Conversation* reflects. The opening scene of the film demonstrates both the expertise of Harry as a surveillance expert and the film's strong association with its historical context of recent assassinations and widely publicized conspiracies. The scene opens with crane shot of Union Square in San Francisco, slowly zooming in on the crowd of people as the credits roll. As the various members of the crowd wander, a strange synthesized sound of electronic interference is introduced; the same sound reoccurs throughout the film as an auditory signal of surveillance. Thus, Coppola conditions the audience to see the film through surveillance. Although we are initially unaware of what the sound is or where it comes from, it is an unnatural sound, one that is artificial. Coppola almost immediately draws our attention to the constructed presence of this interference and we are

unable to escape the sound permeating our ears. From the onset, surveillance is established as an uncontrollably omnipresent force.

As the sequence remains fixated on the surveillance technologies surrounding the characters, Coppola also establishes a strong association between the technology used by the characters in the film and the political events occurring at the time of the film's release. With no central focus, the camera continues to zoom in on the moving crowd until the camera closes in on a mime who approaches Harry. The camera then cuts to a man on the roof of City Paris aiming what looks to be a gun toward the ground. As he looks through the viewer, the camera cuts to his point of view. A young attractive, well-dressed couple, who we later learn is Ann and Mark, are marked as the targets through the crosshairs of the lens. The audience later learn from Harry that the lens is part of a high-powered, "aptly named, 'shotgun [microphone]''" (Beck, "Citing the Sound" 159), which also causes the digital interference heard on the soundtrack. However, the crosshairs of the viewer resemble an image of a sniper's scope, evoking memories of recent assassinations of well-known figures, such as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. By viewing the microphone as literally analogous to a weapon, we associate surveillance with a weapon, a theme that returns throughout the film. However, as shown in this scene, Coppola blurs the distinction between sight and sound. What we *see* calls to mind contemporary national trauma, yet we later learn the device we see through only functions to record sound. This dynamic between sight and sound remains in constant flux throughout the film, particularly in Coppola's construction of point of view<sup>5</sup>. Yet the lack of distinction between sight and sound in this opening scene draws attention to the critique of all types of surveillance, visual and aural, mediated through technology, with particular awareness of the social paranoia

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<sup>5</sup> I will return to the idea of how Coppola constructs point of view through vision and sound later in this section.

of the time. Coppola's film is not just a critique of sound recording technologies but the ways in which surveillance facilitated by technology becomes ever more pervasive,

*The Conversation* is not just a film that portrays surveillance through the simple act of looking and listening. It considers the radical technological advances in visualization and how these new surveillance technologies are partly symptomatic of political turmoil. Coppola displays his acute awareness of technology's role in contemporary political and historical instability, in most notably Watergate. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a surge of reports and rumors of electronic espionage that only escalated with the Watergate scandal: "from 1972-1974, news media were reporting the Watergate break-in and the ensuing controversy over White House tape recordings" (Gray 123). As a film about a surveillance expert who records tapes for a living, *The Conversation* strongly alludes to the Watergate tapes. However, like *Rear Window*, this film is not just about the immediate political environment of Watergate. Although the events of Watergate resonate loudly in *The Conversation*, the film represents a larger sphere of paranoia of which these conspiracies were only a part. In truth, Coppola's conception of the film began before the Watergate scandal in 1972: "Coppola formulated the basic premise of the film as early as 1967 and completed filming in early 1973" (Beck 158). The fact that Coppola conceived the idea for the film before the Watergate break-in is only more indicative of the strong sense of paranoia, detachment and fear of conspiracy in late 1960s, early 1970s America. Although the technology shown in the film strongly correlates to scandals that involved similar technologies, the film remains focused on the personal tragedy of Harry, a man who lives in and helps perpetuates a world that is dominated by surveillance, where privacy is no longer sacred.

Through Harry, the film depicts an acute and personal sense of isolation through Harry rather than directly commenting on the immediate political events.

*The Conversation* details the lonely life and tragic fate of Harry Caul, a surveillance expert whose work seeps into all aspects of his life. Although Harry is the protagonist of the film, he's a problematic character to identify with, not only on a narrative level but cinematically as well. As Robert Kolker argues in *A Cinema of Loneliness*, "in *The Conversation*, [Coppola] does everything to keep us away. The camera acts as a barrier between us and the events and the central character, refusing to reveal what we want to see or think we ought to see, revealing instead only the phenomenon and problems of observing" (Kolker 194). Although Coppola seems more willing to unravel the ways in which surveillance technologies operates than to delve into Harry's character, we still share Harry's perceptions. It is clear that Coppola is criticizing the manipulation of technology and the pitfalls of surveillance technologies, yet what is the film's message concerning human agency in this new context of technology? As the film unfolds through Harry's perceptions, Coppola uses point of view as a means not only to identify with Harry but to also comment on how visual and aural perceptions interfere with the assumed objectivity of technology. This is perhaps most apparent in how we, as the audience, perceive the recordings.

After Harry refuses to hand over the tapes to his client's assistant, Martin Stett, despite Stett's warning that the "tapes are dangerous," he brings the tapes back to his workplace. Just as in the Union Square scene, Coppola demonstrates his sharp understanding of the technology involved in Harry's profession. As Harry relentlessly manipulates and reconstructs the recording, producing a clearer rendition of what was recorded, Coppola amplifies the sound of the tapes rewinding and replaying. During this process, the camera cuts among Harry, a close up of the tapes playing, and a flashback to the recording in Union Square. As Coppola reinforces the recording with a visual rendition of what was recorded, we both "see" and hear what Harry

perceives. Through his manipulation of the tapes, Harry is able to reconstruct more of the dialogue between Ann and Mark:

Mark: Later in the week, Sunday maybe.

Ann: Sunday definitely...

Mark: Jack Tar Hotel. 3 o'clock. Room 773.

Ignoring his fight with Stan, his assistant, Harry continues to work on the recording, reconstructing it obsessively. The sound of bongo drums competes with Ann and Mark's dialogue as the camera cuts to the visual flashback of their conversation:

Ann: I love you.

Mark: We're spending too much time together here.

Ann: No, let's stay just a little longer.

Mark leans over to Ann's ear but all that is heard is a muddled, incomprehensible sound. Harry rewinds and repeatedly "sweetens" the recording, as the camera cuts between Harry's mastery of his surveillance equipment and the tapes playing. Still unable to hear the last line, Harry, frustrated, attaches another piece of equipment. As he repeatedly manipulates and replays that crucial part, the camera cuts back to the visual rendition of the scene, until Harry is able to hear the last line:

Mark: He'd kill us if he got the chance.

The camera cuts back to a close up of Harry, then cutting to a photograph of Ann and Mark, and the camera lingers on the tape recorders and other equipment, as if the equipment is guilty of the last line. Harry rewinds and plays the line again, confirming what he already heard. As the recording returns throughout the film, visually and aurally, Coppola blurs vision and sound together through Harry's perception.

Despite all of Coppola's efforts to emphasize the presence of sound in the film, I would argue that Coppola uses sound as a means of perception that is ultimately crystallized through its

visual counterpart. What we "see" of their conversation is interpreted as what Harry "sees" when he listens or remembers the recording. As some critics argue, "the primary problem of *The Conversation* [...] is how audio sensations are rendered in a primarily visual medium (Beck 158). However, by allowing us access to Harry's visual perception of the recording, Coppola aligns us with Harry's perspective. During the Union Square recording, Harry only watches Ann and Mark for a brief amount of time before he leaves to go to a nearby van where Stanley monitors the different recordings. Thus, we assume that what we see of the recording is Harry's perception, the way he subjectively "sees" the recording, solidifying our alignment with his point of view.

Although we are allowed this insight into Harry's perception, what we learn through Harry's perception of the recordings proves to be void. While vision is exclusive to Harry's perception, the sound of the recording is objective, in the sense that what we hear is not mediated through Harry's point of view. What we hear of the tape recordings is not the product of Harry's perception. They only reveal what Mark and Ann said. Thus, the recording serves as "objective" information, a technologically produced document of Ann and Mark's conversation, word for word. Despite this objectivity, we misinterpret the tapes, believing that Mark and Ann are in danger. We hear the same recording, the same words as Harry, and like Harry, we misunderstand their significance. Harry's perception derives from technology that is supposed to reveal the truth yet as we later learn, Mark and Ann are not the victims but the culprits of a murder. The tapes serve as the objective truth yet human agency falters in the misinterpretation. However, it is not only Harry who falters, it is the audience as well. By visually aligning the audience with Harry's point of view, Coppola forces us to identify with Harry while at the same time, share the guilt in this misinterpretation. The blame does not solely fall on Harry. We are also guilty of the

misinterpretation of technology. Human agency, represented through Harry, is thus flawed but we are a part of it.

Coppola not only exposes our flawed belief in the objectivity of surveillance technology but also our compliant role in surveilling through these means. Although we identify with Harry through visual and aural perceptions, Coppola disrupts our identification with Harry by asserting his own presence in the film in order to further contemplate our intervening role in surveillance technology. This disruption is apparent in the scene where Harry returns to his apartment after the Union Square recording, in which a static shot deviates from Harry's point of view in a way that imitates surveillance technologies. He comes to his apartment door where he unlocks three separate locks, to hear the alarm sound and finds a wrapped wine bottle on the ground. As he walks in, the apartment is sparsely decorated and immaculately clean. He calls his landlady, Mrs. Evangelista, briskly thanking her before he interrogates her about how she got into his apartment. As Harry questions her process he gets up from the couch and leaves the frame but the camera remains stationary. After a moment he returns to the couch, saying "I thought I had the only key." Contrary to traditional film conventions, the camera does not follow Harry. Rather it momentarily acts as a stationary hidden camera. Kolker keenly comments on this scene: "From whose point of view are we observing the privacy of this private man who invades others' privacy? [...] Why does the shot, more than anything else, seem to emphasize its own presence and the presence of the room, of Harry in it or out of it, the object moving unnoticed by him outside his window, the presence of the act of observation itself?" (Kolker 195-196). This self-reflective shot reveals Coppola's intentions of drawing attention to the presence of the camera itself and his agency in constructing this scene. As we become aware of the camera's presence, we begin to not only consider Coppola as a directorial force but also we begin to assess our own

act of watching. In this static shot which resembles the gaze of a surveillance camera, we are no longer the invisible spectator but now conscious of our act in watching Harry. Despite his landlady's overtly kind gesture, Harry's heightened paranoia is exposed, reflecting his fears of being watched. Coppola's camera represents the fulfillment of Harry's fears: the possibility of being watched, of having his privacy invaded. We are placed in the uncomfortable position of surveilling Harry, subjecting him to our gaze.

The final scene also features a similar shot. At the end of the film, Harry discovers that Mark and Ann are the culprits rather than the victims. The Director's murder was covered up as a car accident. In the last scene of the film, Harry plays his saxophone in his apartment when he hears the phone ring. He hears the sound of a tape winding and Stett's voice: "We know that you know, Mr. Caul. For your own sake, don't get involved any further. We'll be listening to you." Harry then hears a tape play back the sound of Harry playing his saxophone. Consumed by paranoia, Harry tears apart his apartment, ripping out the floor boards, tearing down the wallpaper and finally breaking apart the most sacred item in his apartment, a small figurine of the Virgin Mary. The last shot pans over the destruction of the apartment, passing by Harry playing his saxophone in the rubble of his self-destruction. The camera does not pause on Harry but rather continues to pass over him, and reverses direction to pan over his apartment again and it continues like this until the credits role. The movement of the camera in this scene mimics a security camera, another form of surveillance. Kolker recognizes this connection and comments, "we are left in a position similar to those we have been forced to take throughout the film: observing, intruding, observing our intruding, removed and engaged at the same time" (Kolker 202). In these brief moments, our attention is drawn to the presence of the camera. We are no longer seeing through Harry's point of view but rather the perceptive that Coppola constructs for

us, independent from Harry. As our viewpoint aligns with Coppola's all-seeing yet not all-knowing camera, we not only become aware of Coppola's agency in constructing the film but our role as surveillers. Unlike the rest of the film where we experience the narrative through Harry's visual and aural perceptions, this is a moment where Harry is no longer our surrogate in the act of surveillance. We left to contemplate our own guilt in watching through Coppola's camera. This unnerving identification with Coppola's camera is precisely what is so disturbing about *The Conversation*. By removing the audience from Harry's perspective in these few key moments, Coppola intends for us to consider our instinct to watch, our desire to look, but he also incorporates us with the guilt involved with surveillance.

As Coppola's periodically reminds the audience of his presence as the director throughout the film, we must question his role and his purpose in making the film. *The Conversation* highlights the use of new emerging technologies that were then on the forefront of artistic experimentation in film. In doing so, the film displays the great potential in the use of technology for aesthetic forms. Yet *The Conversation* is also a tragedy of the misuse of surveillance technology for a character who uses similarly sophisticated technologies that Coppola would have used to make the film. This paradox remains a lingering complexity in the film, a complexity that is never really solved at the end of the film. Yet I would argue that this paradox is important to consider and one that Coppola wants the audience to recognize. When we consider Coppola's agency in this film and the similar types of technology he would have used, it is apparent that, like Hitchcock, Coppola displays an ambivalent attitude toward surveillance. Coppola offers no resolution to this paradox, nor does he intend to. Rather, he seeks to leave these lingering questions and complexities unsolved. His film is more invested in contemplating our agency in surveillance through the personal tragedy of Harry Caul.

Other critics have interpreted the film differently. In his essay on *The Conversation*, Norman K. Denzin concludes that the film is "not about morals and the human conscience; it is about life in a world where nothing any longer has any status beyond its symbolic representation on a sound disk, a videotape, in a photograph, or on a printed page. The social has not only become the text, it is the text" (Denzin 140). According to Denzin "Playing off of talk that makes a difference and talk that is a commodity, Coppola shows how everyday life has become an art form, an aesthetic experience, talk turned into a good recording" (Denzin 140). However, by viewing *The Conversation* as a postmodern commentary on the commodification of communication, Denzin overlooks the moral consequences with which Coppola confronts the audience. I would argue that the film evokes our own introspection on our ethics in watching, particularly in the contemporary context of isolation and paranoia. Although I disagree with Denzin's postmodern interpretation of *The Conversation*, he does refer to a crucial point in understanding the film. As Denzin points out "To study Harry is to study who we are. Harry's self, like ours, knows itself only through the look, investigative gaze" (Denzin 137). By implicating the audience into his surveilling lens, Coppola, like Hitchcock, is making a statement about morals. The few crucial moments when Coppola's camera diverges from Harry's perception hints at our own culpability. We all have an urge to look, to see the personal lives of others but by directly bringing the audience into this action, Coppola turns the responsibility onto the audience. Rather than making a statement about surveillance, Coppola questions his own agency as well as the audiences'.

Throughout *The Conversation*, Coppola seeks to expose the contradictions within the act of surveillance, how we both engage and criticize the intrusive tactics of Harry and Coppola's camera. Despite Harry's self-proclaimed detachment from his work, Coppola never demonizes

Harry: "Coppola's refusal to cite Harry as an agent of evil and his refusal at the same time to allow us a subjective understanding of him denies us both pathos and outrage" (Kolker 198). Although he is an invader of privacy, Coppola forces us to identify with him, to feel for him. When Harry becomes the victim of the technology he so aptly masters at the end of the film, we pity him. We sympathize with a surveillance expert in a film that reveals the grave consequences of surveillance, but what are we left with at the end? As Kolker argues, "It is the joke and bitterness of the film that it does not permit the personal anguish of its central character to answer the questions the film raises" (Kolker 199, 201). While I partly agree that Coppola's intentions were to leave the film ambiguous, to leave questions unanswered, I would argue that through his construction of point of view, Coppola instills in the audience a certain guilt or complicity in surveilling Harry, as shown in the last scene. As the credits roll, this guilt lingers. What we are left with is an uneasy questioning of our own ethics in looking and watching others. We no longer have Harry to blame for our act in surveilling. We must evaluate our own visual intrusions into the personal lives of others.

## IV. *Caché*

### i. Introduction

As surveillance progresses from the act of looking through the lens of a camera in *Rear Window* to the use of surveillance technologies in the form of tape recordings in *The Conversation*, we come to *Caché*, to a film that portrays the ways in which contemporary surveillance has evolved into a more expansive, unfixed complex. Unlike *Rear Window* and *The Conversation*, *Caché* does not solely comment on immediate political and social events but rather provides a retrospective glance at France's past in mediating the cultural and post-colonial identity in the present. By simultaneously considering the past and present, Haneke uses surveillance technologies, namely videotapes, as a means to expose the personal guilt of the main character, Georges Laurent (Daniel Auteuil), and collective guilt of France in its relations with Algeria. However, *Caché*, more so than *The Conversation*, is an opaque film, one that does not explain itself nor intends to. In order to decipher Haneke's film, we must look back to the past and how the historical events that the film refers to affect the current conflicts the camera exposes through its surveilling gaze. This chapter seeks to untangle the various facets of surveillance present in *Caché*: the visible and hidden, the past and present, the personal and collective. In doing so, we will gain a better sense of not only how the videotapes reflect the multidimensionality of contemporary surveillance but also how surveillance mediates a national identity on a local scale.

Georges, a literary television host, and Anne Laurent (Juliette Binoche), who works at a publishing company, receive various surveillance tapes, accompanied by disturbing childlike drawings, from an anonymous source, documenting various scenes of their home and personal lives. As the tapes are sent to the school of their son, Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky), and Georges'

workplace, Georges and Anne become more and more concerned. After receiving a tape of his childhood country estate, Georges begins to suspect Majid, (Maurice Bénichou) the son of an Algerian couple who worked for Georges' family in his youth. He visits Majid, who now lives in a rundown apartment on the outskirts of Paris, accusing him of terrorizing his family. Despite Georges' accusations, Majid consistently and peacefully denies any involvement. After hiding his suspicion from his wife, only to have a videotape of his confrontation with Majid sent to his house, Georges explains that his family adopted Majid after his parents disappeared on October 17, 1961, briefly alluding to the Paris Massacre of 1961, "a police massacre of dozens of unarmed, peacefully demonstrating Algerians in the streets of Paris during the evening of October 17, [1961]" (Rothberg 26). Georges only expresses that he felt resentment toward the adoption. After Pierrot briefly disappears, later claiming he was at a friend's house, Georges returns to Majid's apartment, accusing him of sending the tapes and kidnapping Pierrot. Majid, non-militant, only responds that he did not send the tapes. Majid tells him that he wanted "[Georges] to be present for this," before he slits his own throat. Afterward, Georges, shaken, reveals to Anne that Majid was sent to an orphanage shortly after the adoption due to a cruel prank where Georges told Majid to cut off a rooster's head, only to later tell his parents that Majid did it to scare him. After Majid's suicide, Majid's son (Walid Afkir) confronts Georges at his work. Before Georges kicks him out, Majid's son denies any involvement with the tapes and tells Georges that he "wondered how it feels, a man's life on your conscience." Georges takes two sleeping pills after work and dreams of (or remembers) the scene where Maijid was taken to the orphanage. In a long shot, the camera films Georges' family estate from a distance as Maijid is cruelly and physically forced into a car to take him off to an orphanage. The film ends with a

long shot of the exterior of Pierrot's school as the children leave for the day, featuring an indecipherable interaction between Pierrot and Majid's son.

In order to fully comprehend the scope of Haneke's film, we must have a clear understanding of the historical events that correlate to the current events in the film. Georges' relationship with Majid and the consequent dynamics of the entire film are largely shaped by the events of 1961. In the fall of 1961, at the peak of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), the victory of Algeria, a former French colony, was in sight. Yet:

At the very moment when the war seemed headed for a certain end with the coming independence of Algeria, violence intensified in the metropole as well as in the colony. Ongoing violent confrontations between the French state, the Algerian independence group the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), and the extreme right-wing Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS) culminated in a police massacre of Paris during the evening of October 17 (Rothberg 26).

On this night, "Under police chief Maurice Papon, a former official in the Vichy Regime, as many as 200 Front de Libération Nationale supporters are estimated to have been killed by the Parisian police while protesting curfews" (Landwehr, 122-123). Despite the brutality of the massacre, "there was no official confirmation of the size and nature of the operation and virtually no media coverage of the event" (Landwehr, 123). Through the correlation between the repressed events in France's history and Georges' past, we discover how *Caché* is equally invested in the past and present as well as the individual and the collective. The film's reference to October 17 facilitates the memory of the past but also its repercussions in the present: "A film structured around the return of the colonial repressed, *Caché* garnered three awards at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2005, just a few months after the passing of the controversial law that called for

the teaching of the 'positive aspects' of colonialism; the film opened in Paris that fall, in the immediate wake of the social unrest in the suburbs" (Rothberg 281). Although Georges only mentions the Paris Massacre once throughout the entire film, the present consequences of postcolonial oppression resonate loudly in the relationship between Georges and Majid. By extending the temporal multiplicity of the videotapes to the film as a whole, we will explore how *Caché* reveals this dynamic between the past and present and how the surveillance and suppression of past traumatic events actively mediates a nation's current postcolonial identity and conflicts.

## **II. Multidimensional Surveillance and Postcolonial Guilt**

In *Caché*, we have no Jefferies or Harry Caul to mediate the act of surveillance. Instead, we are left to understand surveillance solely through the inexplicable videotapes whose high-definition feature resembles the image of the narrative itself, causing us to question every image in the film. The ambiguity and complexity surrounding the tapes may explain the difficulty in understanding the film. Despite Georges' suspicion of Majid, the audience is offered no logical or clear possibility of a culprit or motivation behind the videotapes. However, we should not dedicate our attention to uncovering the surveiller. Rather this chapter seeks to show how *Caché* is more invested in the multidimensional nature of contemporary surveillance, represented through the surveillance videotapes that operate both in the past and present in the diegesis of the narrative and also in France's postcolonial relationship with Algeria. *Caché* compels the audience to explore the ripple effect produced by the multifaceted nature of surveillance, how these objective, inherently meaningless videotapes not only expose the cracks in the nuclear bourgeoisie family of the Laurents but also function on multiple visual and temporal planes in

order to extend the localized individual guilt of Georges' past to the collective postcolonial guilt of France's history, most explicitly through the events of October 1961.

The opening scene of *Caché* presents this dynamic between the past and present through the sophistication of modern video technology but also causes the audience to question their own perception of surveillance. The first scene opens with a static, documentary-like shot of what we later learn is the Laurent's chic apartment in an upscale neighborhood of Paris apartment. The long shot, lasting more than two minutes, refrains from any movement and is placed at a distance from the house. The birds chirp in the background and a man rides his bike past, unaware of the camera's hidden presence. We see a woman, Anne, exit the house. Finally, we hear Georges' voice ask "Well then?" and Anne ask "Nothing?" Rather than viewing the establishing shot<sup>6</sup> of the scene, the audience is watching a videotape of the Laurent's home that is simultaneously being watched by Georges and Anne. As Ipek Celik notes in her article "'I Wanted You to Be Present': Guilt and the History of Violence in Michael Haneke's *Caché*," "the opening long take of the house proves to be a surveillance video image, and because both the film itself and the surveillance video are shot with a high definition digital camera, the transitions between the two kind of images is seamless" (Celik 70-71). Part of the disorientating effect of this scene is the shift from an objective point of view to a character-bound perspective. Once we realize that this is a surveillance tape, we realize that rather than viewing through a third-person narration, we see through the perspective of Georges and Anne, the subjects of surveillance, and simultaneously through the unidentified surveiller's gaze. The disruption in our perception, in what we assume we are seeing and what we are actually seeing is a perennial theme in *Caché*. This scene forces

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<sup>6</sup> An establishing shot is typically used to establish the setting at the beginning of the scene.

us to suspect every subsequent image in the film, questioning whether it is part of the narrative or another surveillance videotape.

Instead of viewing surveillance through the surveiller, we must contemplate the effect the videotapes have on not only the characters in the film but us as well. As Haneke blurs the lines between the narrative and the surveillance videotapes, this shot also calls attention to how surveillance has become so integrated in our everyday lives that we are unable to identify its presence, resulting in the constant paranoia that the Laurents live under. Rather than exploring the mechanics behind the advances in video technologies, as *The Conversation* does with recording technologies, Haneke merely presents the videotape, disguised as an establishing shot, and the audience is initially unaware of its context. Haneke deliberately evokes this suspicion among audiences in the first scene to demonstrate how what we see is no longer enough. Instead of solely examining the image itself, we now must consider its context, in terms of perspective and temporality.

The disruption of our perception in this opening scene leads us to consider the multiple temporal dimensions of the videotape. Although we are watching the present perspective of Georges and Anne, the videotape is also a rendition of what happened in the past. This temporal duality conditions us to consider the following surveillance tapes on multiple temporal fields: as a videotape that was filmed in the past but also re-experienced in the present. Because of the suspicion that the first scene creates, causing us to suspect the many long shots in the film, we view *Caché* through multiple perspectives and temporalities. As the narrative progresses, Anne and Georges receive more tapes, shifting not only in content but also in their temporality. The following videotapes further crystallize the temporal multiplicity presented in the first scene by extending the temporality of the tapes to outside of the narrative. One of the first videotapes that

Anne and Georges receive is filmed from inside a car pulling up to Georges' childhood country estate. Instead of featuring a tape of Georges' present life, this videotape evokes past memories of his childhood and forces Georges to remember the past in order to answer questions in the present. Through these surveillance tapes, Haneke liberates the audience from aligning with a single character's perspective and timeline. Although the film mostly follows the experiences of Georges as he deals with his repressed experiences with Majid, the videotapes repeatedly invite a contemplation of the past and present simultaneously through multiple perspectives. Through this multiplicity, we are able to consider *Caché* as a whole on multiple temporal and perspectival fields, extending Georges' experiences to the postcolonial identity of France.

By recording the past and present of Georges' life and memories, these videotapes also dictate the future actions of Georges. After receiving the tape of Georges' family estate, Georges and Anne receive another videotape, first filmed from inside a car then from a hand-held camera walking up to a run-down apartment in a Paris suburb. After deciphering the street name, Georges goes to the place where the videotape leads: Majid's apartment. Georges knocks on the door and Majid opens it. Surprised yet composed, Majid invites him in, politely asking him to sit down. Yet Georges aggressively questions Majid, "What do you want from me? Money?" In response to Georges' accusations that Majid is behind the tapes, Majid, confused, asks "Mind saying how you found me?" Georges hands him one of the disturbing child-like drawings that accompany the tapes. Majid only responds with ignorance and indifference. When Georges asks "Who has been terrorizing my family?" Majid responds "I don't know. Why do you talk like we're strangers?" When Majid asks Georges about his life and career on television, Georges only continues to interrogate Majid about the videotapes. With their conversation going nowhere, Georges leaves with a final threat:

Georges: I'm going to leave now. If you try to interfere in my life, scare my family or damage me, you'll regret it, I swear.

Majid: You're threatening me?

Georges: Yes, I'm threatening you. Believe me.

Majid: I believe you. But you don't believe me. I didn't want anything from you. I never sent you a tape or anything else. Not this either [hands Georges the drawing].

Georges snatches the drawing and walks out. Majid remains seated and says, "I'm glad you came." The camera cuts to Georges entering a nearby cafe, where he calls Anne tells her no one was at the apartment.

A scene later we see the same scene between Majid and Georges but from a different angle. Instead of the shot-reverse shot between Majid and Georges, as shown in the original scene, the camera is placed at a distance with Majid in the center of the frame and Georges' back turned toward the camera. Although the camera's positioning resembles the previous videotapes of the Laurents home, this videotape is not disguised as a scene in the narrative but instead, reiterates what we have already seen from a distanced, objective angle. This time we are immediately aware that what we see is a videotape that Georges and Anne are also watching. Unlike the previous surveillance tapes, this tape does not disorientate the audiences' perception. As we instantly register the image as a videotape, our attention turns toward the larger implications of this videotape within the context of the narrative.

The videotape not only forces Georges and the audience re-experience the confrontation between Georges and Majid, but also solidifies the connection between the personal guilt of Georges and the collective guilt of France. First, it exposes Georges' lie to Anne, forcing him to give a vague explanation about his fractured and tainted past with Majid. Georges apologizes to Anne, indicating that he suspected the culprit was Majid after receiving the videotape of his parent's country estate, but wanted to spare Anne the stress before he was sure. Georges explains that Majid's parents worked for Georges' family. He continues "In October '61, the FLN [Front

de Libération Nationale] called all Algerians to a demonstration in Paris. October 17, 1961.

Enough said. Papon. The police massacre. They drowned about 200 Arabs in the Seine.

Including Majid's parents most likely. They never came back." Afterward, as Georges explains, his parents adopted Majid, assuming "they felt responsible in some way." Georges admits that he felt annoyed by Majid's adoption but when Anne asks him what he did, Georges remains elusive. He only recalls that he told lies about Majid, "the usual stuff kids lie about." When Anne probes him for more information, he retorts, "I don't remember." Georges explains that Majid was sent to a children's home a few months after the adoption. Despite Anne's questioning about the details surrounding the adoption and Majid's leave, Georges responds, "I don't feel responsible for it. Why should I?" Although Georges only briefly references the Paris Massacre once throughout the entire film, it is precisely his reluctance to recall these events that mimics the French unwillingness to confront the trauma of their collective postcolonial memory. The videotape allows us to re-experience the confrontation between Georges and Majid but it also evokes a retrospective self-reflection that sheds light on larger historical and social implications at stake.

As the previous videotapes condition the viewer to consider the film on multiple perspectives and temporal planes, we must view this tape not only in the diegesis of the narrative but within the more expansive context of France's colonial past. The videotape forces Georges to remember and recite the events of 1961 in an attempt to identify the culprit's or possibly Majid's motives.

However, it also compels the audience to look to the past trauma of postcolonial oppression against Algerians in understanding the current Franco-Algerian relations, represented through Georges and Majid. In constructing temporal and perspectival multiplicity through the videotapes, Haneke extends Georges' individual disavowal of responsibility and refusal to

acknowledge the consequences of October 1961 to the collective guilt and denial of postcolonial France.

However, the videotape also exposes what was previously unknown: the grief of Majid. After Georges leaves, the hidden camera continues to record with its indifferent objective lens as Majid breaks down and begins to sob. Thus, the videotape reveals what was unseen by both Georges and the audience and we are offered a new, unsettling view of Majid's suffering. By considering the multiplicity of perspectives and temporalities in the film, Majid's suffering becomes symbolic of the community of Algerians living in the shadow of postcolonial France. As Celik comments in her essay, "This historical event [October 17, 1961], its concealment, and the contemporary repercussions of such violence both of the event and its silencing are central to *Cacheé*'s structure. The film's temporal index suggests that Haneke is lending film and video images to evoke multi-temporality in the present, and also to evoke the history of injustice as a continuity presented to us a rupture" (Celik 70). In contrast to the suppression of media coverage of October 17, 1961, I would argue that this particular videotape exposes the postcolonial injustice that was formerly silenced. By offering a glimpse of Majid's suffering, the videotape voices the afflictions of an oppressed community living with a hidden traumatic past. Through the videotape's new perspective, we are able to see how Majid's grief epitomizes the current repercussions of the postcolonial history between France and Algeria. As a film that continually disrupts the audiences' perception in order to present itself on multiple temporal and spatial fields, *Cacheé* allows us to consider Majid's anguish as an allegory for the long-oppressed suffering of Algerians in France.

By drawing upon aspects of the today's indefinite, multilayered network of surveillance, Haneke presents a film that is very much rooted in the past while commenting on the present.

*Caché* reveals the ways in which contemporary surveillance is no longer a single identifiable act but a more expansive, unfixed network that operates on various temporal, visual and perspectival planes. With the events of October 17, 1961 quietly resonating throughout the film, we are able to look past the narrative of the film in order to view *Caché* as a reflection on how a country currently deals with a hidden past. Through the videotapes, Haneke interweaves the past and present in order to reflect how the characters in the film and a nation deal with a hidden past. *Caché* not only represents the multidimensionality of surveillance in the modern day, but also allows us to apply Georges' fractured relationship with Majid to the larger context of Franco-Algerian relations in both the past and present.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Whether it is through Jefferies' camera in *Rear Window*, Harry Caul's recording tapes in *The Conversation* or the anonymous videotapes in *Caché*, these three films demonstrate how popular media reflects and responds to social anxieties surrounding surveillance at the time of their release. Rather than analyzing these films through psychoanalysis, postmodernism or other more common approaches, this thesis is more concerned with how surveillance operates within the narratives of *Rear Window*, *The Conversation* and *Caché* as a means to consider how these films speak to contemporary communal anxieties among audiences living in a society mediated by surveillance. When McCarthyism reached its height in the 1950s, Hitchcock's *Rear Window* presents surveillance as a force that facilitates communal harmony yet simultaneously questions the ethics behind Jefferies' lens and Lisa's motives. Twenty years later, Coppola's *The Conversation* questions our predisposition to derive objective truth from surveillance technologies. Yet as Coppola shows us, the blame shifts from the technologies we depend on for information to ourselves. In the final scene, we are no longer left with Harry or his tapes to blame but rather ourselves when we become the surveillers. As a contemporary film, *Caché* represents how digital technologies and the expansive network of modern surveillance has extended to multifaceted temporal, spatial and historical levels. Although these films are acutely aware of the historical context they are a part of, they also epitomize enduring themes surrounding surveillance, addressing our natural desire to watch, to abstract information from what we see or hear. In detailing the more personal and individual layers of surveillance, these films extend beyond our current perceptions of a more distanced, systematic surveillance in the form of governmental censorship or more recently, SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and the regulation of Internet activity. Rather than linking surveillance directly to immediate political

and social issues, all of these films explore the more intimate exchange of surveillance, how it seeps into the everyday, and how this type of localized surveillance reveals the foundation of larger social and historical environments. The accentuated attention to what it means to watch or listen in all of these films is not simply a self-reflexive cinematic approach but instead symptomatic of a larger sphere of paranoia and isolation under which these films were produced.

Of course, *Rear Window*, *The Conversation* and *Caché* are not the only films that respond to our increasingly surveilled world. Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981), Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006) are only a handful of the numerous films that deal with surveillance at various levels, whether in terms of security and government intervention or on a more individual level. More recently, as surveillance technologies are becoming more and more prevalent, surveillance narrative films are increasingly aware of technology's power and omnipresence. In *Blow Out*, John Travolta plays Jack Terry, a movie sound technician who accidentally records a murder, covered up as a car accident. *The Truman Show* features Jim Carrey as Truman Burbank, an insurance salesman who discovers that his entire life has been filmed as a television show. *The Lives of Others*, set in 1980s East Germany, focuses on a Stasi agent who develops a personal connection with a questionably subversive playwright whom he spies on. These films and many others represent our enduring fascination in watching and being watched by others. As surveillance technologies become evermore present, advanced and pervasive in our world, future surveillance narrative films will continually question the ethics and consequences involved in watching. I offer my thesis as a means to invoke a critical look at surveillance narrative films, past, present and future, and how they speak to our perennial anxieties toward surveillance and our own desires to watch.

Although this thesis is not exhaustive, I focused on *Rear Window*, *The Conversation* and *Caché*, as a way to evaluate our evolving responses to the ever-changing complex of surveillance. By looking at how surveillance is represented in these various narratives, how characters react and respond to the act of watching others and how the moral message of these films resonate among contemporary audiences, we are able to view how these films elucidate a heightened awareness of surveillance and consequent social anxieties in the context of McCarthyism, Watergate or digital media. Whether it is the simple act of looking or it is mediated through technology, the portrayal of surveillance in these films represents and meditates upon our enduring awareness, paranoia, and desire to look in a world where there is always the possibility of someone watching.

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