

“When we see Blacks,” Genet wondered “do we see something other than the precise and sombre phantoms born of our own desire? But what do these phantoms think of us, then? What game do they play?” Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) 494.

### *For the people of Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq*

#### Exoticism a.k.a. Ungraspable Phantoms of Desire: Functional Amnesia and Critical Positions

The other is a production of desire; and exoticism is one angle where a large group of textual and visual narratives are conditioned within the production. Post-colonial theory made us realize the criticality of our positions in relation to such materials, and called for a theoretical decolonization to be implicated within the reading.

This is a well-known plot from A, the colonizer to B, the colonized, and the constant relationship that ricochets back and forth between the observer and the observed. A produces textual and visual narratives of B, transforming B into something else than it really is and these narratives turn reality into a futile issue, for the dominant fictions overcome the reality of the other. In fact, when A talks of B, A talks of itself, its fears and its lusts. In this production of desire, there exists an intricate relationship between the gaze and the constructed narratives. Many apt readings and theorizations were made critiquing this plot of desire with/during physical and psychological decolonizations during the recent histories.

In his book *Colonial Harem* published in 1986, Malek Alloula wrote about the postcards showing Algerian women taken in the early years of 20th century where the gazes of Western photographers attempted to possess and hence colonize them. He investigated the phantasm of possessing Oriental women through the transparency of the spaces created within the postcards, “where bodies are taken without any possibility of refusal”<sup>i</sup> Those postcards sent back to Europe disseminated visual narratives of this phantasm of possession, that is, the desire about how A wanted to see B. In his introduction, Alloula claims that the immense amounts of postcards should now be sent back; in other words, the gaze of A should be reversed, B should look back at A so that the centuries of old metanarratives can be deconstituted.<sup>ii</sup>

A recent film about the 70s in Haiti titled *Vers le sud* by Laurent Cantet talks about Western white women staying in a hotel by an exotic beach of Haiti. There they are accompanied by attractive young and old black men, their phantoms of desire, as quoted from Genet in the epigraph of this article. Thus, the gaze is not only concentrated on the women but also on the men, exoticizing both as the observed object of desire. When the leader within the group of white women, Ellen takes a naked snapshot of her very young and glamorous lover, Legba lying on the bed, one is initially reminded of other colonizing gazes that documented the object of desire by trying to possess it and later disseminating them via postcards. Secondly, because of Legba's specific pose on the bed one is reminded of Gauguin's famous painting *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892).

Uncannily, there's a spirit of death watching Legba that is present in Ellen's photograph that is an obvious exotification of the other. A spirit of death which Legba is aware of and which Ellen and her rival Brenda can feel but don't want to know about for they are protected within an exotic illusion. The spirit of death is the political oppression and turbulence in Legba's country. His body is found deceased on the exotic beach at the end of the film. The rivals Ellen and Brenda leave the island, both facing the fact that they can't possess Legba, not even knowing what he has really thought or felt about them in their encounter. Juxtaposing the exotic illusion and the non-exotic fact of Legba, Cantet is very dexterous in his strategies and where he positions himself as a maker. He almost irritates his viewer by letting the ambiguity of Legba, the phantom of desire, remain in suspense juxtaposing the phantasm and the fact without any direct and concrete interpretation of the situation.

Nonetheless, the story continues to recreate itself, taking different faces and masks as the mentality of the colonizer remains intact. As Turkish artist Huseyin Alptekin says "The issue of the 'other' and 'otherness' has been discussed for the last fifteen years and become a cliché, but the problem still exists."<sup>iii</sup> A very recent visual analysis of this continuity came from Michael Haneke. In *Caché* (2005), he mingles the personal past, the feeling of guilt and the collective memory as another example of his critical look on white western bourgeois society. *Caché* is about A's terror faced with the sudden change in the usual relationship between A and B, the observer and the observed; in other words, when B reverses the gaze onto A. A video shot of a parlor in a good neighbourhood in Paris opens the film with the voice over of two people discussing the image. In the second scene, we understand that this is a discussion between Georges and Anne Laurent, watching an anonymously sent tape on their tv, trying to understand the motives of the person who has sent it. Other anonymous tapes and postcards showing an image of a sick child spitting blood keep continue to be sent during the film. In fact, the recipient of the tapes is Georges Laurent, and inadvertently, the contents in the tapes refer to his secret troubling childhood memory: The memory of the Algerian child, Majid, adopted by his family after the boy's parents died in the Paris police massacre in 1961.

Terrorized by the existence of the other, little Georges convinces his parents to send Majid away. The references in the anonymously sent tapes are interpreted by Georges in the way the anonymous sender aims. He locates a shot of a poor neighborhood in Paris, to be an area where Majid, as an adult is currently living in. Based on his false conjecture, Georges extrapolates the identity of the sender. He is certain that Majid will take his revenge some day. The phantom of this personal guilt, quite closely related to the collective memory of the country they live in, has kept haunting him subconsciously.

Georges is terrorized by Majid's gaze, and his memory expands the field of guilt, as he continues to receive one tape after the other. His personal guilt tortures him to attempt an erasure. He threatens Majid to stop sending the tapes. At the end, Majid commits suicide before Georges' eyes. His guilty relief in eliminating the source is brutally renounced when another tape arrives showing Majid's suicide and Georges' reaction. What Georges doesn't want to accept is the fact that he can't erase the memory, he can't stop the reversal of the gaze that will and should take place one day so that A and B are even. The source of the problem is not with the existence of the other but with the dominant mentality that tries to overcome the other to solve the problem. *Caché* catches the zeitgeist of our times, and follows up with the recreation of the story in a contemporary milieu. Like the owner of the unidentified gaze in the film, B will keep on sending immense postcards.

Turning to examples in current contemporary art, projects such as Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts by Kuratorisk Aktion (Frederikke Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen) are important attempts to examine the issues of colonialism with lenses of critical positioning. In the introduction written by Kuratorisk Aktion for the project's user guide, the curators underline the fact that "The colonial history of the Nordic region (...) is alarmingly absent in the collective memory of the once-colonizing Nordic countries."<sup>iv</sup> Wikipedia says that amnesia is a condition in which memory is disturbed. It has organic and functional causes. Functional ones are psychological factors, such as defense mechanisms. The statement written by Kuratorisk Aktion reminds us the attitude of Georges in *Caché*, how he suppresses the guilt he feels from causing a child, Majid, to be kicked out, and Georges' refusal to confront this reversed gaze. We may suggest that Georges' and the Nordic countries' amnesia – here the representatives of Western colonial mentality- is caused by their defense mechanisms when facing the existence of the other. Hence, their amnesia may be specified as the functional one.

Tamar Guimarães, one of the participants of Act 2 of Rethinking Nordic Colonialism in Greenland, sensitively phrases this state as an oscillation between guilt and amnesia when she writes about her work *Jan Leton and the Archive*.<sup>v</sup> A Brazilian born artist living in Copenhagen, Guimarães' earlier work focused on the intimate relationship between language and nationalism and on how language is instrumentalized to serve the nation state. In *Jan Leton and the*

*Archive* she narrates the story of B, the colonized Jan Leton in the land of A, the colonizer, Denmark. Each story she collected inscribes Jan Leton's presence in Denmark differently. A black man who was given as a slave to the bailiff of Skagen; a "thank you" present sent by a captain rescued from shipwreck around 1806; a man whose appearance at the shore prompted the locals to run away in horror since they thought he was the devil; a black man whose only company was a monkey; upon his death, a ghost in the forest he planted when alive; a corpse whose burial place cannot be ascertained.

Guimarães reports that "apart from the death record she can find no written references mentioning Jan Leton until fifty years after his death," and adds that before that time "he is a character of oral history".<sup>vi</sup> One can assume there was a Jan Leton in the city since the local archive contains fifteen items referring to his presence there. The outcome of her research was translated into a text in which a researcher, represented in the third anonymous personal pronoun, goes through the motions looking for information on Leton. A narrator reads this text over slides from a local performance in 1989 in which Leton appears as a character.

Through the researcher who is seen as a foreigner disrupting the established functional amnesia surrounding Leton, Guimarães reverses the gaze usually working from A to B. When asked why she is interested in Jan Leton's story, the researcher replies she is "one foreigner interested in another". Though in the first reading, she talks about her efforts of collecting information of him, a black foreigner living in the land of A; reading between the lines of the information she gathers, she subtly talks about the criticality of this plot developing from A to B, this time the colonized exoticized as the bailiff's slave in the land of the colonizer. The colonizer never wants to lose its dominant exoticizing position in the history of Jan Leton. This history, a production of the gaze of the colonizer who is also the observer and the narrator, errs because this is the only way for A to remain within its safe and dominant territory and to hide from the guilts of colonial history. Thus, to deconstruct this position, Guimarães reverses the gaze that formulates the errors in Jan Leton's history which may be read as the defense mechanisms in operation.

The fact that the sometimes disparate information on the story of Jan Leton describing him, his situation and his death differently can be made parallel to the desire behind the making of erotic postcards of Algerian women, as well as with the desire of the white woman, Ellen, in *Vers le Sud* to *postcardize* her black, exotic lover, trying to turn the other into narratives through the medium of safe, distanced, and familiar ways. This process works as a stabilizer, making the other, the unknown, safe and not dangerous anymore. The accounts of Jan Leton's lifetime are written fifty years after his death. The written stories around Leton also mark a space where he is taken without any possibility of refusal. He, as a black person who lived in Skagen (Denmark) once, becomes diffused and dubious therefore safe and harmless. The ambiguous territory, created by these

different accounts which in turn are made into a myth of sorts, signifies a deliberate attempt to erase and forget what is signified by Leton. On the other hand, it may be suggested that under this attempt to erase and forget, the phantom of Jan Leton has haunted Skagen community's subconscious just like Majid has haunted Georges'. What Guimarães phrases as 'the impossibilities of history' can also be read as an ambiguous territory of insecurity that works as a shield in the collective memory. A defense mechanism as such leads to a collective forgetting in society about guilt over colonial histories for the sake of protecting and strengthening the boundaries of national identity. Therefore, a functional amnesia is at work which Guimarães deconstructs through the reversal of the gaze.

It is impossible not to see the backdrop of this interest. We live in the times where economic and political migration has made itself felt by first world countries, and even though first world countries' economies depend on immigrant cheap labour that does not mean that immigration is seen as less than a threat. There are always long queues in front of immigration offices, queues of people asking for work and residence permits. There are problems of integration, discrimination and xenophobia, a tense relationship between the locals and the newcomers. One can't help remembering the remarkable Matthew Kassovitz film *La Haine* (1995), the story of three immigrant youngsters in the suburbs of Paris, how they find a gun in the street and how they promise to kill a policeman if their injured pal in the hospital dies. How is it possible to forget the fires in Paris last year, and the riots that quickly spread to other cities? After making *Caché*, Haneke was seen as a harbinger of the later events that occurred in France. In an interview he gave to *Tageszeitung*, he made a crucial point that is impossible not to agree with: "I'm very surprised when people talk about post 11th September or what happened in Paris in last September as if something new. What is happening now here and all over the world is the legacy of colonialism."<sup>vii</sup> The critical question is who is allowed to become a composite that constructs a nation. Furthermore, this statement marks another fact to be underlined. Nationalisms are always dangerous; the adjectives before nationalisms only signify the danger better. Recently the situation has globally become even more dangerous as people act ignorant and indifferent about deliberately nourished nationalisms.

With this backdrop, Cantet and Haneke's films and Guimarães' piece underline the necessity of reconsidering our positions in terms of rethinking the collective memories of the colonial history and its reflections on our contemporary problems. Using the strategy of reversing the gaze, all three problematize the impossibilities to possess the phantom of desire successfully. The more urgent the problems of intolerance, xenophobia and nationalism become, the clearer it appears that we should reverse our gazes to make the positions of A and B even. That is how we can take critical positions when we are confronted with the contemporary faces and masks of the metanarratives of the other. That is how we can deconstitute the state of functional amnesia.

Spivak asked her famous question years ago “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Today, we still ask whether and how change is going to take place. Critical positions taken by Cantet, Haneke and Guimarães suggest that the change may only take place through the confrontations with the collective memory of colonialism in our daily lives. Because every passing day becomes a constituent of the collective memory of the failed desire. The reflections of that memory in future won’t change until critical positioning becomes a daily tool to reread our experiences.

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<sup>i</sup> Alloula, Malek ‘The Colonial Harem: Images of a Suberoticism’, *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 399.

<sup>ii</sup> Alloula says:

“A reading of the sort that I propose to undertake would be entirely superfluous if there existed photographic traces of the colonized upon the colonizer. In their absence, that is, in the absence of a confrontation of opposed gazes, I attempt here, lagging far behind History, to return this immense postcard to its sender.”

Alloula, Malek *The Colonial Harem*, downloaded from [http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0816613842/ref=sib\\_dp\\_pt/104-7528330-3731904#](http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0816613842/ref=sib_dp_pt/104-7528330-3731904#),

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<sup>iii</sup> Raymond Minichbauer, “The Issue of ‘Otherness’ Has Become a Cliché, but The Problem Still Exists: An e-mail-interview with Huseyin Bahri Alptekin,” ed. Maria Lind and Raimund Minichbauer, *European Cultural Policies 2015*, (London, Stockholm, Vienna: IASPIS, 2005) 73.

<sup>iv</sup> Kuratorisk Aktion “Nordic Amnesia: An Introduction to *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*”, *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*, 7.

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*, 40.

<sup>vi</sup> All the quotations from Guimarães’ piece are from the transcription of the voice-over that will appear on the third issue of *Kult: En temaserie for overløbere*, published by the Institut for Sprog og Kultur, Roskilde University (DK), in fall 2006.

<sup>vii</sup> An interview with Michael Haneke on 01/26/2006:

<http://www.taz.de/pt/2006/01/26/90226.1/text>