

On “Cache” and Quality
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A project I’ve set out for myself is to use the idea of quality—high quality—as a guide to what I do in all aspects of my life from here forward. To put it simply, I’ve watched enough pro football and cable talk shows, and I’ve guzzled enough cheap wine and eaten in enough Denny’s restaurants. And these tee shirts with the holes in them have to go. From now on, with regard to anything—a goal, an activity, a personal relationship, the choice of clothing, what occupies my mind, what I create, how I behave toward others, anything—I intend to ask of myself: is this high quality? If the answer is yes, it’s on. If the answer is no, I’ll look around for something where the answer is yes. I’ll try this for a few months and see how it goes.

A couple days ago, I asked myself, what’s a high quality film to watch tonight? The first thing that came to mind is the oeuvre of the Italian film director, Michelangelo Antonioni. Antonioni (1912-2007) is best known for his early-1960s Italian language trilogy, “L’Avventura,” “La Notte,” and “L’Eclisse,” and two later English language films, “Blow-Up” (1966) and “The Passenger” (1975).

I decided to try “Blow-Up.” I obtain films at the local and university libraries, Netflix, and Amazon Prime. I rented “Blow-Up” from Amazon. Indeed, it turned out to be a quality film by my standards, as it is in film critics’ estimates. And it was a quality experience for me. I was energized rather than feeling deadened and used up and looking for a nap or a compensatory candy bar or bag of pita chips.

Something that stuck with me about “Blow-Up” and that paved the way to what I’m going to say in a bit about the 2004 film “Cache”—another quality film—was its ending. The central character, a London photographer named Thomas, is standing out in a big grassy field and he disappears, dissolves, and it is now just the field; Thomas doesn’t any longer exist. And then the final credits roll. When Antonioni was asked why the film ended that way, with the lead character disappearing before our eyes, he said it was to introduce himself and underscore that Thomas was his creation. It was a way for Antonioni to say, “Hello,” “I’m here,” “I

did this,” “I gave you this creation [Thomas] and now I take him away.”

The idea that the directors of films—all artists—are controlling presences even if we, the consumers of their work, are caught up solely with the products of their creations, informed what I think is going on in the 2004 French language film directed by the Austrian Michael Haneke, “Cache” (alternative title, “Hidden”). What I write in these next paragraphs about “Cache” is one big spoiler, so don’t read past the end of this paragraph until after you’ve seen the film, and do see it, it is truly superb, or, the word for the day, quality.

Cache is a mystery film. The mystery, one never definitively unraveled, a fact that has frustrated more than a few viewers and critics, is which of the film’s characters is responsible for eerie surveillance tapes and disturbing drawings that disrupt the comfortable lives of husband and wife protagonists, Georges and Anne (played by Daniel Auteuil and Juliet Binoche). Since the film doesn’t spell out who did the tapes and drawings, and Haneke isn’t saying, there has been a ton of speculation about who did: the aggrieved Algerian did it; the Algerian and his son did it; the Algerian’s son did it alone; Georges did it; Pierrot, Georges and Anne’s son, did it; Anne’s secret lover did it; Pierrot and the Algerian’s son (never named in the film) did it together. Lots of suspects.

My speculation is that *none* of the characters in “Cache” did it. Prompted by Antonioni’s “Hey, I’m here, I’m the one doing this” reminder at the end of “Blow-Up,” I’ve decided that Michael Haneke, the film’s director, did it; that is to say, Haneke played a part in his own movie. My premise is that Haneke—the person, not the artist—looked upon the killing of the Algerian Majid’s parents and two hundred other demonstrators by the Paris police back in 1962, and Majid’s subsequent expulsion from Georges’ family because of Georges’ foul deeds, as being very, very, wrong. However, none of the characters in the drama is in a position to surface this injustice, much less deal with it. So Haneke took it upon himself to put himself in the film and bring it to their attention. And during the course of the film he signals what he is up to:

- No one but Haneke could have gotten the surveillance camera in the first scenes so high up in the air--at least ten feet high, towering over cars and people--and so far away from the building.
- At 13:17 on my DVD there is a large shadow on the left of the screen that sure looks like a movie camera to me.
- None of the characters in the film is likely to have had access to the state-of-the-art videotaping equipment worthy of a major filmmaker used in the surveillance, or bothered to use it if somehow he did have access to it.
- It appears Anne received a phone call from the “stalker.” All the usual suspects had an accent or a youthful or familiar voice, and she would have noted that about the caller to Georges, but she didn’t. It was Haneke on the other end of the line.
- The dialogue in the first encounter between Georges and Majid and the surveillance tape of it don’t match, and only Haneke could have made that happen.
- The last scene in the movie, in front of the school steps, where Majid’s son and Pierrot—strangers as far as we knew--converse as if they know each other, has led a lot of people to conclude that they were the culprits, but they had to be talking about something other than making the surveillance tapes, because neither one of them could have done it. For that matter, their connection may have had nothing to do with anything, because they were two actors who would do whatever Haneke told them to do.

An aside, I suspect Haneke, not one of the characters in the film, was the one who tripped the horse in “The White Ribbon,” if you’ve seen that film (and back to quality, do see that film, Haneke is a good at they come).

The larger point here is that guided by the standard of quality I achieved a richer, more thought-provoking, more gratifying and uplifting experience watching “Cache” than if I had watched Megyn Kelly’s show on Fox, which I confess to have been doing until I recently got rid of the television set, oh happy day after a brief

five-day withdrawal period. It was a good time for me to watch “Cache” and to do this writing--enhancing, gratifying, energizing. And it's been a productive time: it's lead to a deeper understanding of art and its creation; and perhaps with this writing I've shared something worth sharing, if only in passing on the recommendations to check out Antonioni and Haneke's films.

Now to line up some quality things to do for the rest of today. A book I read in the far distant past and didn't understand has just popped into my mind: Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, published in 1974. As I remember --and really, this is all that I remember about the book--it is an inquiry into the concept of quality. That sounds like me at the moment, even though I don't have a sense of whether this book on quality is itself a high quality book—I'll see. I'll head to my local library now and pick up a copy and hope that it is more understandable this time than the last time because, I'd like to think, I'm more capable now of taking in its argument. As for the next film I'll watch, I've not seen Antonioni's “La Notte” and I notice the library has it, so I'll pick it up while I'm there to get Pirsig's book.