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HORROR

A film without politics
Georges Franju's *Les Yeux sans visage*
(*Eyes Without a Face*, 1959)

Taking aim at recent work on *Les Yeux sans visage*, **Curtis Bowman** suggests that we eschew political interpretations of Franju's film, at least in the first instance, in favour of explanations "in terms that are available to us from our everyday lives."

Three recent commentators, including Reynold Humphries in his contribution to the current issue of *Kinoeye*, have sought to find political significance in Georges Franju's *Les Yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*, 1959). [1] It would be foolhardy simply to deny such meaning to Franju's strange masterpiece, but this viewer finds these commentators' claims unconvincing and irrelevant to understanding the film and its effects on the audience. I shall briefly sketch out a few doubts about these political readings; then I shall attempt to explain the film in non-political terms.

Is the history of Nazism relevant?

Given that *Les Yeux sans visage* appeared in 1959, there is some initial plausibility in considering the film not only in the context of France's wartime experience, but also in light of her efforts to retain control of her colonial empire in the post-war period. History, after all, can make its way into works of art. But interpreting this (or any) film in an historical light must make sense within the dramatic context of the plot; otherwise, we introduce irrelevant considerations into our understanding of it.

Joan Hawkins notes that Dr Génessier (Pierre Brasseur) describes his actions to his daughter using a phrase that was also found in the racially charged language of French anti-Semitism:

Dr Génessier mutilates women in order to restore to



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his daughter her true face, "ton vrai visage," he tells Christiane [Edith Scob]. But "vrai visage" is the term that French Nazi sympathizers used during the war to describe French racial and national purity... And the question here, as in occupied France, is precisely how many people must be removed, how many people must be tortured and killed, to "restore" a true French face—a "vrai visage" that is always, it seems, constructed from the skin of the Other.[2]

Is there any significance to this shared phrase? Does drawing a parallel between Dr Génessier and French Nazis illuminate any aspect of the film?



Dr Génessier is a genuine scientist developing new surgical techniques in order to reconstruct his daughter's face, whereas French Nazi sympathizers subscribed to an anti-Semitic worldview that was based on pseudo-scientific racial theories

intended to legitimate the extermination of the Jewish people. Why should we associate his actions with those of the French Nazis, except for the obvious fact that both parties are guilty of committing horrible deeds? Even if viewers are reminded of France's collaboration in perpetrating the Holocaust, the horror aroused by Dr Génessier's actions can be adequately explained without reference to that wartime experience. He does not attempt to restore a true French face to his daughter; he attempts to restore his *daughter's* face to his daughter, and he does so with a clinical detachment (in the infamous surgery scene) that greatly disturbs us.

We even know how Christiane should look, since we see a portrait of her that was painted before the accident that destroyed her face; therefore, the doctor's actions are not in the service of some fantasy, contrary to those of anti-Semites during the war. There is no need to draw historical parallels to explain our horror at his actions. In themselves they suffice to horrify us.

Adam Lowenstein also sees parallels between the film and the war. He writes, "The cruel operation suggests Nazi medical experiments, while the dogs recall the animals belonging to the occupying soldiers." [3] We might be put in mind of Nazi medical experiments, but what difference does it make if we are? How is the thought of Nazi doctors relevant to understanding the surgery scene? Such thoughts shed no light on Dr Génessier's motives. Furthermore, they are not required to explain why his actions disturb us. Once again, Dr Génessier's actions are sufficiently disturbing on their own terms. As for the dogs in Dr Génessier's laboratory, they are the victims of his experiments, not the

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instruments of oppressors; and thus they should not bring to mind the guard dogs of an occupying army. To see the doctor's dogs in this light is to misunderstand their role in the film.

An apolitical heterograft

Reynold Humphries attributes great significance to Dr Génessier's lecture on the heterograft, noting that the audience includes a black man listening to a lecture that makes use of the notion of perfect biological identity. Humphries writes, "That a black person can listen attentively to talk of scientific experiments demanding 'perfect biological identity' cannot but make us stop and think: clearly the man's middle-class origins have blinded him to the reality of history, and very recent history at that. He thus becomes an unwitting, but useful, collaborator in political repression, of the precise kind being practised at the time in Algeria and in the Congo..."[4] None of this is convincing. It is a complete mystery as to why the man's origins must be construed as middle-class in order to explain his supposed blindness to history. Perhaps Marxist dogma would have it that the black man must be middle-class, but the film itself gives no indication of his class status.

The deeper problem with Humphries's political reading of this scene is that there is nothing objectionable in the notion of identity employed in Dr Génessier's lecture. The doctor is concerned with the relation between donor and recipient, for without a perfect identity between the two the heterograft will fail, unless the recipient is bombarded with levels of radiation that would ultimately prove fatal. (The usual sort of cinematic scientific handwaving is at work at this point in the film. Since no details are provided, we are left wondering about the manner in which donor and recipient must be identical.)

Thus Dr Génessier is not postulating some notion of racial purity or superiority that a black man can never possess; instead, he is lecturing on a difficulty facing any plastic surgeon (and thereby sets up the problem that leads him to kidnap the women who are used as donors for his daughter). Perhaps the black man is a medical student from a Francophone country in Africa who wishes to learn how to perform successful skin grafts. There is no need to attribute false consciousness to him. In fact, his presence at the lecture indicates that universal human interests are served by Dr Génessier's research on heterografts, as the doctor himself suggests.

The mere ability to draw parallels between political reality and works of art is not sufficient on its own for justifiably claiming that the parallels should inform our interpretation of the works. This is a common flaw in political readings of works of art. Sometimes, of course, we must interpret a work with reference to political reality. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a clear example of a work that

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gains greater significance from the political realm outside of the work—but not simply because of the similarities between the betrayal of the Russian Revolution and the descent of Animal Farm into tyranny. Orwell's book is clearly a fable with a satirical purpose: after all, ordinary animals never rebel against their masters or engage in political debate. Thus features of the work itself license our looking to the political realm to help us make sense of it.

It is certainly possible that *Les Yeux sans visage* contains the sort of political significance that I have critically investigated so far in this essay. I have raised only a handful of doubts, and thus I have not conclusively shown that the film lacks such significance. But I remain doubtful. Let me briefly sketch out a reading of some aspects of the film in non-political terms as a way of lending greater credibility to my doubts.

Great crimes, familiar feelings

We have no good reason to think that Dr Génessier is the traditional mad scientist found in many horror films. His demeanor is often cold and distant, but he exhibits no signs of madness. He is a supremely skilled surgeon who applies his skills in a morally reprehensible manner. He does so, however, out of love for his daughter. We have no reason to believe that he does not love her. It is therefore hardly surprising that he goes to such lengths to restore her face, especially since he is a widower who has no other children. His motive, in other words, is perfectly comprehensible to us.

Christiane says at one point early in the movie that her father always had to dominate, and that he was driving like a demon at the time of the accident. We should hesitate, however, to consider her a reliable source of information about her father. The trauma of her accident, and the natural desire to blame one's suffering on others, should make us doubt what she says about her father. We cannot justifiably assert that the accident was anything out of the ordinary, or that it somehow reflects on his character as a human being. Louise (Alida Valli), the doctor's devoted assistant and former patient, says that the accident was pure chance.

Her word is at least as good as Christiane's. Later on, after Louise catches her using the phone, Christiane exclaims that her father has found in her the perfect guinea pig for his experiments, thereby implying that his attempts to restore her face are motivated merely by self-interest; that is, by a desire to refine his surgical techniques on a human instead of a dog. Once again, we cannot take her outburst as the truth about her father, especially since her creeping mental disintegration has by now become apparent to us. In short, Christiane's claims about her father provide us with no reliable testimony about his character. All we really know is that he loves

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her.

Dr Génessier and Louise, through their words and actions, indicate that they feel guilty about what they are doing. Shortly after he performs the surgery on Edna Grüberg (Juliette Mayniel) so graphically displayed in the middle of the film, the doctor



explicitly says that he has done wrong. He even says that he has wronged Louise, who agrees with him. Louise expresses her feelings of guilt less explicitly. She shows signs of anxiety and begins to panic at the cemetery after the funeral that is supposedly being held for Christiane, but is, as we know, really a ruse to dispose of the body of Simone Tessot, the first victim of the doctor's unsuccessful attempts to restore his daughter's face. We might interpret her behaviour as nothing more than an expression of fear of being exposed as an accomplice in the doctor's crimes. But she behaves similarly when the two of them return to the cemetery to dispose of Edna's body.

The most telling moment comes when she looks to the sky at an airplane passing overhead. Adam Lowenstein sees her reaction to the plane as expressing a loss of faith in the progress of technology.^[5] But a simpler understanding of her glance upward is readily available. Louise is ashamed of what she is doing. Naturally, she fears discovery. But she so dreads the thought of being judged by others that she wishes to avoid their gaze, even when the others in question are far overhead and thus cannot actually see her assisting in another crime. That is, her shame is so overwhelming that she irrationally fears being seen by people who could never possibly see her.

The observations of the previous five paragraphs make sense of many of the emotional dynamics of the movie. The doctor, who acts from love of his daughter, is assisted by Louise, who is clearly devoted to him. She may also be in love with him, but we cannot be sure of this. Louise is certainly devoted to Christiane as well, perhaps to the point of loving her as if she were her own daughter. Louise's surprise at being stabbed in the neck by Christiane at the end of the movie indicates that she has feelings for the girl. The tear in her eye eloquently expresses her affection for Christiane. Dr Génessier and Louise are moved by ordinary feelings to commit great crimes, and they feel remorse for what they have done.

Politics comes last

The film has other elements that require explanation, eg, the purpose of the long sequences in which the characters do little

more than walk through the halls of Dr Génessier's house, the purpose of the surgery scene, and the symbolism of the doves found first in the painting of Christiane and then in the final scene as she leaves the house and walks into the woods. My suggestion, which will have to remain undefended here, is that these elements, like the ones discussed earlier, are open to non-political interpretations that make sense of them in straightforward ways. In conclusion, therefore, I would suggest that we refrain from looking to political reality until our explanations fail to explain the film in terms that are available to us from our everyday lives. Perhaps facts about occupied and post-war France are relevant to understanding the film, but we should turn to them only as a last resort.

 [Curtis Bowman](#)

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About the author

Curtis Bowman is a visiting assistant professor of philosophy at Haverford College who specializes in the history of German philosophy and aesthetics. He has published articles on Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, as well as edited a three-volume set of the works of Johann Joachim Winckelmann. He is also one of the translators of the forthcoming volume 13 of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, which will be entitled *Notes and Fragments*.

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Footnotes

1. Besides Humphries's essay [referenced below, *n.4*], see Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 65-85; and Adam Lowenstein, "Films Without a Face: Shock Horror in the Cinema of Georges Franju," *Cinema Journal* 37 (1998): 37-58. ▲
2. Hawkins, 70. ▲
3. Lowenstein, 47. ▲
4. Reynold Humphries, "[Dr Franju's 'House of pain' and the political cutting edge of horror: Georges Franju's *Les Yeux sans visage* \(*Eyes Without a Face*, 1959\)](#)," *Kinoeye* 2.13 (9 September 2002). ▲
5. Lowenstein, 47. ▲

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