

Michael Haneke's *Glaciation* Trilogy: A Pessimistic Vision of Contemporary European Society

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Abstract: Cinema is par excellence a medium that captures the social and political mutations of an era, while observing the individual facing the historical mechanisms of their times. This article proposes a brief analysis of how Michael Haneke depicts some of the main identity mutations of modern bourgeois society in his debut films, the so-called *Glaciation Trilogy: The Seventh Continent, Benny's Video, 71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*. Concerned with the ways media and the capitalist principles alter the perception of the individual and their relationship with their domestic and social environment, Haneke adopts in his cinema a bleak perspective on the programmatic dehumanization of the 20th century's last decades. Our analysis departs from the concept of "reification of life", while eventually tackling the way the media and "hazard" structurally influences the cinematic narrative, in order to illustrate a cynical and pessimistic x-ray of the modern family crisis.

Keywords: Michael Haneke, *Glaciation Trilogy*, reification, hazard, social environment, media, image

Michael Haneke is one of the contemporary filmmakers who has provided ongoing reflections on Europe's past as well as on the impact of topical events and contemporary spiritual diseases. The Austrian director has approached important events in the twentieth-century Europe, in a narrative that favors a certain trauma aesthetics and micro-history as well as the subjection to the pangs of an unhealthy environment. This new general state

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of the world is not just the expression of a great pessimism for the future of humanity or a simple desperate reaction to the dominant historical trends. Rather, it could express the individual's repressed feeling of indignation, of suffocation in front of the bureaucratic, relational, and familial mechanisms that the capitalist society maintains even in its pseudo-democratic forms. The contemporary individual is at a concrete impasse, being disarmed in the face of contemporary ideological myths (social security, welfare, lack of armed conflicts, medical assistance, free access to information) through which highly developed capitalism tries to justify its apparent democratic manifestations. Nevertheless, as far as the reality depicted by Haneke is concerned, these myths are just ways of alienating the individual, pushing them to the point of self-destruction.

This analytical approach aims to surprise the singularity of the Austrian director who has found modern methods to frame the individual, the collective, and the most significant social upheavals in the recent history of Europe. When Michael Haneke says that he considers his three films, *The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Benny's Video* (1992), and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994) to be the *Glaciation* trilogy, he refers to a malaise, a rigidity of feelings, a sort of sentimental and spiritual freeze, as if the characters were prisoners in their families or social environments. The lack of empathy creates monsters, ignorance, and a kind of existence that could describe the modern life of Europe of the last century. The goal of this analysis is to identify the mechanism by which this emotional aridity is articulated in the filmic narrative, while surprising the cinematographic approaches to the image, in terms of fragmentation, discontinuity, neutrality. Basically, this study is based on three axes. On the one hand, the Austrian director's trilogy depicts the effects of capitalism on the individuals at the end of the past century, transforming them into mere consumers *consumed* by the desire to possess objects. On the other hand, remaining in the same socio-historical context, Haneke explores the toxicity of the media image on the human consciousness for whom simulacra of reality become more important than reality itself. Finally, using the somewhat experimental principles of cinematic narrative, Haneke creates a parallel between the apparent spectacular automatism of the television image and the subtle disarticulation of social perception.

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In other words, the Hanekean trilogy hypostatizes three ways in which characters—protagonists emblematic of the status of the middle-class at the turn of the century—become victims of a quantifiable, real, and even mediatized historical malaise. It is not by chance that the three films are based on real cases. From this perspective, the filmmaker is always concerned with the concrete, banal actuality of the Austrian middle-class, finding his sources of inspiration in everyday actions and events. For example, *The Seventh Continent* is inspired by an article in the *Stern* newspaper published about ten years before the film was released in 1989: “The article advanced social and psychological explanations. But what interested me was the idea that we destroy this material universe that has annihilated us, before destroying ourselves”¹. Still, the relationship to history appears in a different way in the filmic corpus, when, for example, the historical process is implemented by a particular event which influences the dramatic action and the behavior of the characters, but also the attitude of the spectator. Even if Haneke’s films represent worldviews, at no point should we consider them as a formal extension of the traditions of realist cinema. Rather, they are a cinematic *mise-en-scene* of objects, reactions, and states. Haneke’s approach to the story takes this discontinuous connection into account because the way the director inserts the event into the filmic narrative is never reducible to a cause-effect relationship. The intimate event is never the consequence of a temporal continuum; there is no sequence, but rather a break in the pre-established order of historical continuity. The historical event becomes a sort of background noise and not a material device that can be treated in this historical continuity; rather, it is part of an anti-historical approach. Despite the absence of a homogeneous fabula, there is a well-articulated internal dramaturgy where relationships of immediate causality can be established as a reaction to a plethora of ideological problems.

***The Seventh Continent* and the Reification Syndrome**

Michael Haneke’s *Glaciation* trilogy opposes the alienation of current capitalism with the timeless values of revolutionary eras, such as the struggle for individual autonomy. Still, this combat is left without an assumed finality,

¹ Cieutat, Michel and Philippe Rouyer. *Haneke par Haneke*. Stock, 2017, p. 129.

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as if pessimism, or the failure of the individual in the face of total annihilation would be the only realistic solution. *Reification* is an essential term for understanding Michael Haneke's vision when approaching the bourgeois dramas chosen from the newspapers. Georg Lukács sees in reification a consequence of capitalism, of the new way in which society privileges excessive consumerism, insidiously transforming the individual into a prisoner of their own objects. If the consumer is *consumed* by this urge of possessing objects, this *raison d'être* finally becomes an equivalent of existence. Reification consists of a specific *philosophy* where the material subjugates or substitutes the spirit, up to the point where the individual is transformed into an object in turn. In Lukács' words: "The transformation of the commodity relation into a thing of *ghostly objectivity* cannot therefore content itself with the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities. It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality; they are things which he can *own* or *dispose of* like the various objects of the external world"².

Hence, the Hungarian theoretician speaks of the "objectification of human society"³, designating bourgeois society as a world for which economic values dominate—and satisfy—all the human needs. From this theoretical point of view, one could envisage an ideological reading of Haneke's films in terms of a crisis at the level of the individual confronted with the pangs of an accentuated de-spiritualization, under the influence of the consumerist society. The relation to the image which has lost all connection with its sensitive referent is surprised by the Austrian director through some distortions of the filmic coherence. The characters have undergone transformations that can signify the loss of consciousness at the level of the individual surprised through the lens of their traumas. There is a constant discordance, even a rupture, between the characters of Haneke and their social role. That romantic view of the world constitutes a specific form of criticism against modernity. Hence, there is a critique focused on the globalized civilization that develops

² Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. The MIT Press, 1968, p. 100.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

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with capitalism. This civilization is characterized above all by a “disenchantment” of the world, by reification, i.e., the reduction of human beings to commodities, to objects. At this level, Haneke depicts a sore phase of *dehumanizing humanity* that populates his filmography. Added to this is the elimination of empathy by means of the almost total dissolution of community ties. Family members fail to develop essential human values, which have all become alienating, in opposition to the only values that seem to work—economic exchanges imposed by capital.

Set in the late 1980s, *The Seventh Continent* depicts three years in the life of an Austrian family that comes to self-destruct. Georg, his wife, Anna, and their daughter, Eva, unwittingly become the victims of an overwhelming routine that eventually reveals the meaninglessness of a monotonous existence. Eventually, the couple plan an escape from this social prison, a journey to Australia with no return.



Figure 1. Caption from *The Seventh Continent*. Georg, Anna and Eva waiting for their departure

Thus, the family which, in Western tradition, is the ideal space where intimacy and affection are built becomes a tragic place in Haneke’s films. The roles of father and mother are completely demonized in *The Seventh Continent*, leading their daughter to suicide. There are several situations where

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a switch is found in those roles: either in extreme relationships or in the absence of intimacy between members of the same family. Between the father and his daughter employed at the bank in *71 Fragments*, there is an unsatisfied desire for reconciliation. In other cases, the parents are the victims of their children suffering from an extreme behavior: in *Benny's Video*, the parents try to hide the traces of their son's crime by playing a sacrificial role: to save him at any cost. The immaterial and the inanimate seem to be the only transfers that take place between the members of a family. In these films there is a constant relationship with the object: "I wanted to show what we call in German *Die Verdinglichung des Lebens* and which could be translated as *the reification of life*. In other words, how we run our daily lives, literally being stuck to objects"⁴. Thus, this rigidity of life, the supremacy of the object over the spiritual is constituted by the fragmentation of the cinematic narrative. The unfinished relationships, the lack of coherence in the behavior of the characters are translated through a paradoxical attitude towards the continuity of the narration: spontaneous reactions arise absurdly, according to the influence of the moment and not to a logical cause-effect formula. The deep drama of the Hanekian characters resides in this lack of reaction, of external or internal justification. The narrative logic has no power to influence the fate of the characters who continue their existence outside the fictional story, outside the screen, outside the society itself: "Humans, in the end, don't exist, because they are the sum of all their habits and, even if they have destroyed everything, nothing has changed. Their material universe has taken hold of their inner world"⁵.

In *The Seventh Continent*, absolute evil, meaning extreme violence, articulates the relationships between the characters. The individuals are no longer in touch with their inner selves in a world where they find themselves reduced to the state of objects among other objects: "he [the individual] is determined by his objects as symbols of a certain type of life in which he finds himself acting, like a pure machine, as much in his gestures as in his words"⁶. The way in which the Austrian director introduces the domestic and social

⁴ Cieutat, Michel and Philippe Rouyer, op. cit. p. 132.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Dufour, Éric. *Qu'est-ce que le mal, monsieur Haneke?* VRIN, 2014, p. 15.

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universe of his characters is representative when illustrating the ascendancy of the material over the biological. The film begins by showing not humans, but the ways in which the household objects are used while the family are preparing to start a new day. This frozen gaze where the mechanical sounds or artificial colors of metal and plastic carcasses fill the family environment insists on the mechanization of rituals, including individuals, reduced to their automatic, Pavlovian function. Likewise, the destruction of material goods by the family itself has a great suggestive force: the tearing of clothes, the demolition of furniture, the breaking of mirrors, tables, LPs, and so on. The inanimate passes to the animated, and the spectator witnesses the death of the fish and the poisoning of the characters. The director methodically depicts all this work of destruction as a normality in the daily domestic life of these characters: “Nothing comes to shake up the life of this family, since what the film wants to show is a fact, a family that breaks with society in a tragic way, that is, by committing suicide after having methodically destroyed all the objects of society that alienate their lives”⁷.

This family background is a constant concern in Hanekenian filmography, but what prompts it in most cases is the presence of a peripheral character who generally dies violently, due to the aggressive environment. In each film there is a child who has several functions: passive (witness), participatory, or perturber actant revealing the social puzzle. The choice of young protagonists is a constant in Haneke’s films, and they are delimited as a kind of character of contrast who shocks above all by the modality in which they are exposed to social violence: “it is a dramatic means which has a powerful impact on the spectator. It works the same with the animals that suffer a lot in my films. Like children, they cannot defend themselves and they allow the harm of violence to be felt”⁸. Éva (Leni Tanzer), the little girl from *The Seventh Continent*, represents a typology that can be found in other films: Éva in *Time of the Wolf* (Anaïs Demoustier), the nanny Eva (Leonie Benesch) in *The White Ribbon*, and so on. The little girl from *The Seventh Continent*, for example, suffers a tragic end which is inflicted to her by her parents; this gesture seems to be the incarnation of absolute social evil, while standing for

⁷ Ibidem, p. 23.

⁸ Cieutat, Michel and Philippe Rouyer, op. cit., p. 134.

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the deterioration of family relations in modern society. Éric Dufour, in his attempt to decipher the sources of evil in Haneke's cinema, intuits a strict relationship between the evil of neoliberal society and that of interhuman relations: "[e]vil is the way in which neoliberal society transforms the relationships between people (reification), and it is embodied in an exemplary way in the family and the relationships that its members maintain within it"⁹.

In *The Seventh Continent*, the surprise event appears in the car wash sequence, when the woman, Anna (Birgit Doll), bursts into tears for no apparent reason. This sequence comes after the one in which the characters saw the victims of a car accident, lying on the ground and covered in plastic. Haneke found a similarity between the car windows traversed by enormous brushes and the water which running on the dead bodies in the rain. The analogy is made above all at the level of the sensation: the camera is placed inside the car, and the close-ups are dominated by the enormous brushes, which pass ceaselessly over the windows, symbolically reflecting the suffocation felt by the bodies lying on the pavement. The narrative in *The Seventh Continent*, although focused on a family chronicle, is constructed similarly to *71 Fragments*. The daily events flow without dramatic necessity. One can notice the same absence of the cause-effect relationship. The end coincides with the death of the characters but avoids giving any clarification on the unfolding of the facts, even though it includes several prescient events: Georg's (Dieter Berner) resignation from his office and Anna's lie (she claims that their daughter is sick and will not go to school), the purchase of instruments at the store (scissors, saws, hammers), the withdrawal of all their money from the bank and the selling of the car. It is the relationship between this normality and the unexpected end that is aberrant. The characters are not devoid of feelings, however, as the father reminds the little girl to put on gloves so as not to hurt herself during the destruction of the objects; the father will apologize when he destroys the aquarium; at the sight of her daughter's dead body, the mother will burst into tears; and so on. In the letter that Georg leaves to his parents, he does not explain their gesture, he just says that their decision has been well thought out. Michael Haneke does not give us any motivation; the impact that the film produces comes from this lack of explanation. The film asks questions about an unintelligible and

⁹ Dufour, Éric, op. cit., p. 23.

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indecipherable act, which is cruel and monstrous by its calculating coldness. In *The Seventh Continent*, there are several events without justification, which become even more monstrous by their apparent banality: the purchase of instruments at the store, the withdrawal of all the money from the bank under the false pretext of leaving for Australia, only to tear it up and throw it in the toilet later, ordering exquisite meals, tearing the clothes, and demolishing the furniture. But what creates this cold, inhuman atmosphere is the disorder: the events are not hierarchized, and it is the image that gives moments of tension—the eye that watches us the other end of the microscope, the little girl’s lie about having gone blind, the uncle’s sobbing, the woman’s nervous breakdown at the automatic car wash. Michael Haneke claims that it is exactly the construction of the script that is the key to the story. For *The Seventh Continent*, he proposes a construction in three parts, each part corresponding to a day of a different year in the life of the family. Any other construction would have spoiled the effect, and it is only by proposing this almost sober structure to show three different days that the end would be so disproportionate. Michael Haneke leaves it up to the viewer to find the disorder, the part that goes wrong from seemingly banal events. It can be guessed that everything has an ideological, pessimistic explanation: the crisis of the modern family.

Benny’s Video: Media and Dehumanization

Benny is a teenager with a passion for devices, video games and violent movies. But his passion becomes an obsession that will affect the way he perceives reality. After he invites a girl to his house, a tragedy changes the course of his life.

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Figure 2. Caption from *Benny's Video*. Benny's gaze is distorted by the camera's artificial eye.

The political thinking of an era can be explained by the counterintuitive character of the association between film and politics. Still, commercial and arthouse narrative feature films focused on a social environment may apparently have nothing in common with the reality understood by politicians, citizens, or interest groups. In this regard, Haneke is not a political filmmaker, but a creator of alternative realities through which the political and social mechanisms can be explained. Similarly, Haneke's cinema does not contain docudramas, although certain ingredients of his aesthetics could also lead to this area, while embracing the principle of historicity in creating those views of the world through symbolic representation and the moving image. The Austrian director creates a kind of cultural praxis through which he separates many axiomatic categories of this imaginary—dominant, residual, archaic aspects, in permanent contradiction with the emerging new ideologies. The problem with his characters is that they are on the 'wrong' side of the barricades, being subjected to a process of consumption without any possibility of social emancipation or positive transformation. The media image is the most diabolical way in which Haneke's characters move away from the illusion of some views of the world, of a "romantic anti-capitalism"¹⁰. In the case of Haneke's films, the relationship between the television image and daily

¹⁰ Lukács, Georg, *op. cit.*, X.

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events suffers a strong disturbance: the passive characters who find themselves in front of the television screen become more and more rigid and absent as the event hidden inside the television image becomes more and more dynamic, noisy, even dramatic. Thus, the television image is a substitute for the vitality of human beings who become mere carcasses, devoid of empathy: “I often tell myself that, if I had no information on the world that through television, I would have already committed suicide! The television news only reports disasters, violence, suffering, and fiction films add it to the spectacle, to make people lose the sense of reality... The gaze is thus deformed”¹¹. In modern society, the image is so well integrated into reality that it almost precedes it.

In *Benny's Video*, which is inspired by a story from the newspapers of the time, violence is above all a fictional act, a filmed image, stimulating Benny (Arno Frisch) to try a mimetic act while transposing the reality of the image into concrete reality. The screen is the one that dictates the mechanisms of human nature's reactivity. Haneke himself admits that he is very sensitive to this lack of reaction, of remorse on the part of the culprits in the face of their crime, which he tries not to justify, nor to explain, but rather to offer the spectator a type of neutral cinema of observation: “I came across several cases in the newspapers of young people who had committed murders and who, afterwards, when they were asked for explanations, they answered: *I just wanted to know how it feels!* This shocked me a lot and I started thinking about it”¹². Benny is fascinated by the filmed image and by ultra-violence. He watches the slaughter of a pig by some adults several times, including his father. The quality of the image, the colors, the lights are so poor, that the audience realizes that this is a non-professional video: two men lead a pig out of a barn, a dog barks, several men try to immobilize the pig and then there is a close-up of the head and boots of the man with the slaughter hammer. A shot is heard, and the animal falls to the ground, growling. The sequence lasts 45 seconds. It is resumed in slow motion, and there is a stop-frame on the eyes of the animal, which is about to die; the audience sees once again the slaughter hammer hitting the hog's head, witnessing its agony. The viewer hears the clicking of a video tape and, at this point, the audience realizes they are

¹¹ Cieutat, Michel and Philippe Rouyer, op. cit., p. 143.

¹² Ibidem, p. 142.

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witnessing a series of footage images. Serge Goriely, in a text on the representation of death in Haneke's cinema, remarks that even if "this sequence lasts less than two minutes, on its own, it is enough to fuel a debate around the possibility to film and record such a situation"¹³.

In *Benny's Video*, the first shot of the captive bolt pistol is an aberrant event, occurring by chance during the game that Benny proposes to the girl. Apparently, there is no intention of murder, but the imminence of an event which follows a pre-established order: Benny repeats his blow. The cries of the injured girl trigger in him the need for the gesture: he paces up and down his room to take a new bullet and complete his act. It is under the "effect of reality" that Benny acts without knowing exactly where his actions will lead him. Using the words of Jean Baudrillard, Benny's gesture is a consequence of that "simulacrum of violence emerging less from passion than from the screen: a violence in the nature of the image"¹⁴. There are the sequences in which Benny, after having committed the murder, wanders in front of the skating rink, then goes to shave his hair, sequences which are devoid of any logical coherence. This succession is commonly imposed by chance, and it only finds meaning after a few operations of synthesis taking place in the intellect. The effect of reality also subsists in the need to find meaning among some isolated or juxtaposed events. In looking at Benny's trip to Egypt, the story presents us several solutions: it is about his parents' decision to keep him away from the crime and from the body that must disappear, the journey itself a way of expiating one's fault, of forgetting it, of fleeing one's bad conscience, and so on. Haneke gives us the choice, revealing a multitude of answers. In such films, the characters find themselves in the grip of events, and even those who cause dramatic effects have no premeditation; the situational absurd is the one that triggers the dramatic action. Moreover, in *Benny's Video*, Haneke reports on an even more disturbing event: how a murder, premeditated or not, causes a disorder in the consciousness of the characters. Christa Blümlinger remarks that the process of becoming aware in this film is "addressed to the

¹³ Goriely, Serge. "Pieces of Truth for Moments of Death in Haneke's Cinema." *Fascinatingly Disturbing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Haneke's Cinema*, edited by Alexander D. Ornella and Stefanie Knauss, Pickwick Publications, 2010, p. 107.

¹⁴ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Transparence of Evil*. Verso, 1993, p. 75.

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spectator himself”¹⁵. All the events that follow the murder aim to question the spectator on a very relevant fact: is it possible to live a normal life after all? In this film, we witness the same disordered narrative structure: the events do not follow a reasoned hierarchy, such as, for example, in a thriller. Instead, there is a fragmented story that doesn’t have a detective plot: how to kill and get rid of the body. Haneke alternately offers us an ethical discourse: is it possible to live with it as if nothing had happened?

The image in Michael Haneke’s films is made up of contradictions: it presents one side of reality, while suggesting what it hides, the existence of something off-screen. The image is made up of a mixture; it tries to delimit the visible from the invisible and each film has a particular relationship to it. In *Benny’s Video*, a trio of women sing on a TV broadcast something cheerful while Benny’s mother has a tantrum. In *71 Fragments*, the TV screen is always present in the sequences that take place in the apartment of the old man who is unable to contact his daughter. Likewise, television that encompasses a general and programmatic dehumanization becomes the mute but noisy witness to the collective suicide of the family in *The Seventh Continent*. Besides, Benny, after having killed the young girl and hid her corpse in the wardrobe, tries to do his homework as usual while the TV is on. In all these cases, television with its transmissions of violent news only represents a sound and visual background which has no other purpose than to accompany the existential void. The fictional excerpts that appear in *71 Fragments* and in *Benny’s Video* are no different from news broadcasts, representing only perpetual collages of images, whose sole purpose is to be consumed in an unconscious way by the viewer. There is a thin line between this and dehumanization. Thus, “the television image intervenes on the viewer’s sensitivity through the excess of violence that it depicts with pleasure, the possible initial impact on the viewer weakens as the almost uncontrollable progression of live transmissions, of comments, of analyses trivialize the real event and transform it into a filmed and projected substitute which loses all connection with the original event”¹⁶.

¹⁵ Blümlinger, Christa. “Figures du dégoût chez Michael Haneke.” *Austriaca (Le cinéma autrichien)*, vol. 64, 2007, p. 97.

¹⁶ Cieutat, Michel and Philippe Rouyer, op. cit., p. 145.

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The eponymous character of *Benny's Video* is addicted to screens as substitutes for a reality transformed into recorded images. Benny perceives everyday reality in a distorted way, filtered by the eye of the camera. Dufour reinforces the power of the reality representation through image, insisting on the fact that for Benny, “the real death is not distinguished of the representation of death and, therefore, of the fictional death of a character in a film”¹⁷. Benny, who is fed by images of violence on television and in film, can no longer tell the difference between reality and fiction, between reality and the images of reality, or the bloody virtual universes that American films and video games depict. The window of his room becomes a screen that operates cuts between his reality and that which is off-screen, behind the window-screen, perceived by Benny as a fictional reality. Consequently, Benny communicates with his environment only through the image recorded by the camera: he communicates with his parents through the filmed image (the scene of the crime, the trip to Egypt); he sees his victim through the “screen” of the videotape rental’s window shop; the neighborhood, the district, and the street are revealed only as cuts made by the gaze through the window-screen and the surveillance cameras. Haneke himself insists on the ascendancy of the filmic referent over the physical referent, affirming that it is always better to make the spectator’s imagination work than to impose concrete images, because the image is always more banal. In his other films, for example, Haneke uses the image as a substitute for other, more provocative images. Thus, the trafficking of the weapon remains hidden, illegible, being ‘covered’ in the sequence shot in the café in *71 Fragments* where only two people having their morning coffee behind a window traversed by the reflections of passers-by can be seen. The spectator, just like the passers-by, must see only the two men accompanied by a dog. Hence, “in a way that is correlative to the shift passing from the psychological dimension to the social dimension, we will notice how certain beginnings of sequences, before introducing the faces, show bodies and situations”¹⁸. The director provokes the viewer to examine and fill the image with its content. The image of the Australian beach in the poster for the travel agency in *The Seventh Continent* becomes tragic in its inability to go beyond the very concrete reality it depicts. Apart from its function as an

¹⁷ Dufour, Éric, op. cit., p. 60.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 27.

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advertising image, as a compensatory universe intended for consumption, the image of the Edenic shore hides a tragic visual: the sinking of a family that decided to commit suicide.

71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance: Everyday Madness and Identity Dismantling

In a cinematic image pulverized in a series of existential details from the lives of several characters, the director illustrates in *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* a tragedy through which he questions the very coherence of a society touched by madness.



Figure 3. Caption from *71 Fragments*. Maximilien B. enters the bank.

The Austrian filmmaker depicts empty destinies, which populate a mercantile world, devoid of transcendence, for which consumerist existence is a permanent emotional annihilation. For these inconsistent destinies, chance is the only ‘ordering’ principle that, under the interface of routine, often erupts into domestic or social tragedies. From the beginning, Michael Haneke admits his intention to eliminate the internal cohesion; the constituent parts appear independent of each other, the effect of readability is no longer major, and the viewer is caught up in a series of fragments rejecting a linear plot. Referring

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to the director's penchant for discontinuous cinematic narration, Peter Brunette states: "[l]ike most post structuralist theorists ... Haneke clearly believes that any truth about the world, about reality, is only knowable, if at all, in the form of fragments. His film, like poststructuralist theory, is anti-totalizing in the sense that nothing—no person, no idea, no event—can ever be finally understandable and completely explicable"¹⁹. The causal links therefore remain unclear. The action in the event is scattered in broken gestures, and gradually deteriorates. For example, the sequence of the old man's telephone conversation with his daughter in *71 Fragments* contains all the ingredients of a drama without conveying any information—it just reproduces in a single shot a telephone conversation of approximately 7 minutes, pauses, threats to hang up, moments of silence, and so on. Even if functional information becomes clearer, it is quickly annihilated by the conversational flow, it gets lost in the flood of words, and no longer has its primary intentionality in speech; information that could become important in a coherent enunciation becomes banal and meaningless. Haneke skillfully conceals his dramatic intentionality and only at the end can the full message be seen. Usually it is the accidental event, the chance that becomes a motif organizing the narrative scheme. But in other films it is an aberrant event that organizes the unfolding of events: a suicide, a murder, a catastrophe, several violent acts. The narrative scheme does not revolve around the event itself, but rather on the construction of a state of mind: *The Seventh Continent* is not a film that tells the story of a suicide, but it presents the daily life of a family in crisis; *Benny's Video* is not a film about the story of a murder, but the story of becoming aware of a murder.

In almost all of Michael Haneke's films, there is a moment which initiates a rupture between the plot and the narrative: the film is constituted by a series of analyses on the existential effects provoked by the dramatic trigger. The third part of the *Glaciation* trilogy, *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, implements the trajectories of archetypical characters. In order to destroy any effect of sensationalism, the Austrian director announces the end at the very beginning: "On 23.12.93, Maximilien B., student, 19 years old, killed three people in a bank in Vienna and committed suicide shortly afterwards with a bullet to his head." Usually, these kinds of films continue

¹⁹ Brunette, Peter. *Michael Haneke*. University of Illinois Press, 2010, pp. 42-43.

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with a logical series of events, in a crescendo explaining the cause-effect reaction. But for Haneke, nothing continues in this way and, therefore, everything is a series of aberrant events with no connection except that of describing tiny lives. The only link weaving this social background is the fact that his characters do not manage to achieve anything: an old man lives only to visit his daughter, who works in a bank and treats him worse than an ordinary customer; a couple adopts a child, then another, as if they were picking a brand of products from a supermarket; a young Romanian refugee arrives in Vienna on Christmas Eve; a student, Maximilien B. (Lukas Miko), suddenly gets off the rails. Apart from the news items, there is the television set, an obsessive character in the whole *Glaciation* trilogy. The television news is divided between the broadcast of images announcing the war in the world and the accusations of pedophilia against Michael Jackson. At no time is it specified either how or why these human micro-narratives are linked with the extreme violence announced at the beginning of the film. The destiny of Maximilien B. is doomed to be absurd, while the viewer is called upon to reconstruct the pieces of this illogical puzzle. Filmed in tracking and low-angle shots, Maximilien B.'s journey from the bank to his car, where he retires to reach the final point of his existence, deprives the spectator of all redemptive outcome. A few steps further, the Romanian child looks at the lifeless body of an adoptive mother whose blood scatters on the tiles of the bank. There is no way out of this existential maze, no cathartic effect for these mediocre lives. It all boils down to a statistic, a cold, chilling gaze from a humanity reduced to larval kinetics which, projected onto the TV screen, loses all its emotional power. Thus, "the refusal to give a psychological dimension to the characters not only has the interest of collaborating in the creation of a representation of chance. It also has the characteristics of giving another dimension to the characters, which is social. It's the social versus the psychological"²⁰.

In *71 Fragments*, chance is the main device for constructing the story, the one that brings the characters together in the same space at the end of the film. From the very title we understand that chance is the real character of the film, the real problem that Haneke wants to tackle. Moreover, although they do not provide, information for the primary intentionality of the plot, other above-mentioned events also create ruptures, a break in the event chronology.

²⁰ Dufour, Éric, op. cit., p. 58.

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The theft of the jacket in *71 Fragments* is significant in this sense. The Romanian child, an illegal immigrant, sees a mother and her two children playing with their dog in a garden. It is a very sweet image; simple and natural happiness awakens in him the feeling of a lost, inaccessible, distant paradise. The mother forgets the jacket on the bench and the Romanian child seizes the opportunity. The Romanian child appears in another sequence, dressed in that jacket. The theft does not appear as a filmed image; it only represents the concreteness of a desired happiness, of a childlike moment of envy for family tenderness. Even if he has appropriated the object, the child would be deprived of the happiness effect and, when he contemplates himself in the mirror, it is only the material object that he sees, but without feeling the same sensation.

The major themes of contemporaneity are filtered through the film image, which is not a substitute for a documentary, but rather a dramatic attenuation aiming to change the focus of the event during the reception process. The theme of migration, for example, appears in Haneke's films thanks to its mediatic power. Moreover, the central event surprised in the film *71 Fragments* (the bank massacre) becomes just absurd broadcast flash news. In this film, chance seems to be a main element of the storyline: there is not a strict relationship of cause and effect, but disparate events, without apparent connection, which contribute to the general malaise and senseless violence: "[a]t the beginning, the title of the film was *Mikado*... In this game, chance plays a big role, depending on how the sticks fall at the beginning. And after, each is dependent on the others"²¹. Disparate shots, with no connection to the major event, captures the viewer's attention and therefore become meaningful: in an initial sequence of *71 Fragments*, the Romanian child crosses the border clandestinely, arrives in Austrian territory, stops, and looks off-screen. The shot becomes a questioning of his destiny and is framed as a reflection on the contemporary news of the minors' migration, a very sensitive topic for the European media. In *The Seventh Continent*, the enunciative instance accompanies the little girl, her silent way of becoming aware of reality, loneliness, and her environment; the camera is placed at this same distance which separates the daughter from the objects. In this case, the focal length of the camera generates a mental distance. It is as if the little girl were stepping outside the framework of her own existence and contemplating herself from

²¹ Cieutat, Michel and Philippe Rouyer, op. cit., p. 145.

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off-screen. The use of this impersonal camera highlights a parallel discourse, the one that continues in the consciousness of the spectator, but also the one that dictates the way in which it is perceived. In other words, “the transformation of the individual, from an actor in his own life into a simple spectator, is also linked to the status of the media in our societies”²².

Conclusions

For the contemporary consumer of information, regardless of the chosen medium (internet, television, radio, papers), the resulting reality can easily be likened to a fiction that is akin to the aesthetics of film noir, horror, thrillers, and so on. The European virtual space is littered with news which, for the most part, are human rights offenses: racial crimes, crimes against LGBTIQ+ people, terrorist attacks, systematic discrimination, refugee issues, domestic violence, and abuse (both physical and psychological). These have reached alarming levels, but there is enough documentation and evidence accessible to anyone to confirm, inventory, and store this reality. If one takes Austria as a point of reference and look back at the socio-political movements of the 1970s and 1980s, several points of congruence can be identified between past and present. Humankind is witness to a disfigured world, engulfed by pandemics, the war in Ukraine, the technological boom, and gripped by alienation, constantly constrained by concepts and innovations that contrast with the reminiscences of conservative, rigid mentalities that are difficult to remove. The accumulation of these phenomena in the present has led to an acute need for coherent and credible means to facilitate understanding and acceptance of a new normality through an understanding of the mechanisms of the past, from the scientific and historical to the artistic, such as literature, film, and theatre. There is a very strong link between history and fiction: historians also try to ensure that an event can be told as history. They not only dramatize by linking events to certain protagonists, but, when they are set in a certain period (such as the history of the labor movement in Austria in the 1970s), they set a course for them, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but also a turning point in the second half of its course. Thus, the past is a hybrid bridge that plays an

²² Ibidem, p. 59.

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important role in the fight against discrimination of all kinds. This is not necessarily a cause-and-effect relationship, but rather the deciphering of mechanisms for understanding past processes, insofar as they represent recognizable patterns for the present. The concept of “factual literature” thus facilitates the emergence of new hybrid genres that integrate factual material into fictional narratives (neo-journalism, non-fictional novels, historiographical metafiction, fictional documentary, the postmodern historical novel, the para-historical novel, factual fiction, and so on.). Through this lens, events in the present are archived, made explicit by storing and reinterpreting the past. In this context, fiction recontextualizes and rearranges material from the past that does not camouflage fictions as truths but can decamouflage truths as fictions. In terms of cinema, this idea is very similar to that of the German filmmaker Hito Steyerl who, while speaking about her philosophy in understanding the meaning of making a documentary, uses the figure of the “palace of memory” to explain how information is organized by the archive. In this regard, cinema might be perceived as a monument, in the sense that, even if it embraces a *fictional* discourse, it is still a way of *disguising* truth as fiction.

Director Michael Haneke recreates these hybrid bridges between history and fiction. His films not only instrumentalize cases of a not very distant past on a historical scale, but also allow us to find correspondences, explanations, or even fatalities in the manifestations of the present, by establishing patterns, or fictions, through which actuality acquires relevance. Haneke’s cinema, apart from any ideological connotations, aims to modify the relationship between the viewer and the viewed object, whether it is the intimate relationship between the camera and the filmed object/human, or about the spectators themselves. In the first case, there is a duplication of the filmed image which is self-referential and external, detached from its subject. Here lies the difficulty or the discomfort felt by certain spectators in the face of this unjustified violence in the economy of the plot, but so rich in the sense of the characters’ awareness. The director even tries to circumscribe his films within a certain reception aesthetics that favors an active, even cynical spectator. Haneke’s *Glaciation* trilogy is an important document not only because it offers an impactful view of Austrian society, but because it reconstructs a complex view of today’s bourgeois societies: they are cold, insular, violent, and dehumanized by the daily contact with the “image” in all its aspects. In

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this regard, Robert Sinnerbrink is right when he calls Haneke a “post-humanist moralist”²³, explaining his aesthetics as a result of the violent past of this part of the continent that adhered to a post-situationist way of understanding the world: “This post-humanism can be understood in two related senses: first, in relation to the historical experiences of Nazism and post-war forms of violence and trauma, which have rendered traditional forms of humanism subject to skeptical doubt; and second, in relation to the rise of a post-war Debordian *society of the spectacle* that increasingly captures attention and consciousness by means of a system of commodified images (and images of commodities)”²⁴. The important aspects of these socio-cultural changes occurring in capitalist modernity are the increasingly radical elimination of everything that is not rational, scientific, quantifiable; the elimination of any element of mystery, unusual, miracle; in other words, the elimination of the sacred and spiritual dimension. Haneke’s characters represent this loss of miracle, reaching a kind of monadic state.

The Austrian filmmaker created a specific dynamic through his trilogy, which refers to a particular social milieu, both geographically and socio-economically. There are the wealthy families: one located in a residential district (*The Seventh Continent*) and the other in a central apartment (*Benny’s Video*); only in *71 Fragments* are audiences shown the poor classes in their social housing. In fact, Haneke does not topographically reconstruct a city—he circumscribes his vision of an urban space, and implicitly of a human community, depicting these public and private spaces through sound and visual environments. But above all, he creates a media space allowing the interference between the first two. Nevertheless, there is a paradox: on the one hand, there is an extreme compartmentalization to such an extent that the elements are not able to communicate to form a human community. On the other hand, spectators witness a complete impregnation with that media space, leading to the total alienation of the individual by erasing the boundaries between public and private space. The media and the personal space overlap, although the two are structured almost identically due to their lack of

²³ Sinnerbrink, Robert. “A Post-humanist Moralism. Michael Haneke’s Cinematic Critique.” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 16, 2011, p. 115.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

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communication. The sequences Haneke uses are subjected to the same laws of chance by means of discontinuous editing: TV images switch from Sarajevo Process to the latest news on Michael Jackson's trial. The same discontinuity of the media reality is experienced by the individual within the private space, where the living room of Benny's parents alternate the image of the Mona Lisa with a painting by Andy Warhol, with an old advertisement for Pepsi, the picture of a modern kitchen, and so on. In this universe, the same lack of cohesion that exists in the world of objects is also found at the level of individuals. As we have proved in this article, Haneke's cinema is based on specific mechanisms through which the Austrian filmmaker illustrates the cruel alienation of a world intoxicated by dehumanizing capitalism. While the reification of life calls into question the validity of human existence in the monstrous gear of a routine dominated by the insatiable need to possess objects, the ever-increasing addiction to everyday simulacra offered by the mass media pushes the individual towards a form of acute desensitization. Similarly, media chaos impacts the very structures of society's depths, ultimately revealing a cruel, mechanized and destructive humanity which, in the context of an axiological crisis, calls into question the sacrosanct principles of a *sane* Europe. Haneke's trilogy is built like a syllogism in which the basic hypothesis (the description of an alienating lifestyle) appears from the beginning. Similarly, the violence at the end expresses, through a complex of circumstances, all the features of Haneke's universe: lack of communication, saturation by information, invasion of personal space, to name but a few. The viewer is faced with a great ideological ambiguity: is it the fault of the gratuitous action of an individual or of the diffuse and passive responsibility of the collectivity? Through this ambiguity, which is also that of modern and contemporary history, Haneke's trilogy is definitively on the side of historical pessimism.

In this sense, Haneke's cinema does not necessarily resurface as a gloomy prophecy, but rather as a testimonial of a seemingly impossible to rehabilitate Europe. The *Glaciation* trilogy is a document of a country reflecting the destiny of a continent that bears the scars of a past marked by colonial violence and genocide, while adhering to a capitalist philosophy that engulfs an absurd existential mechanism.

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