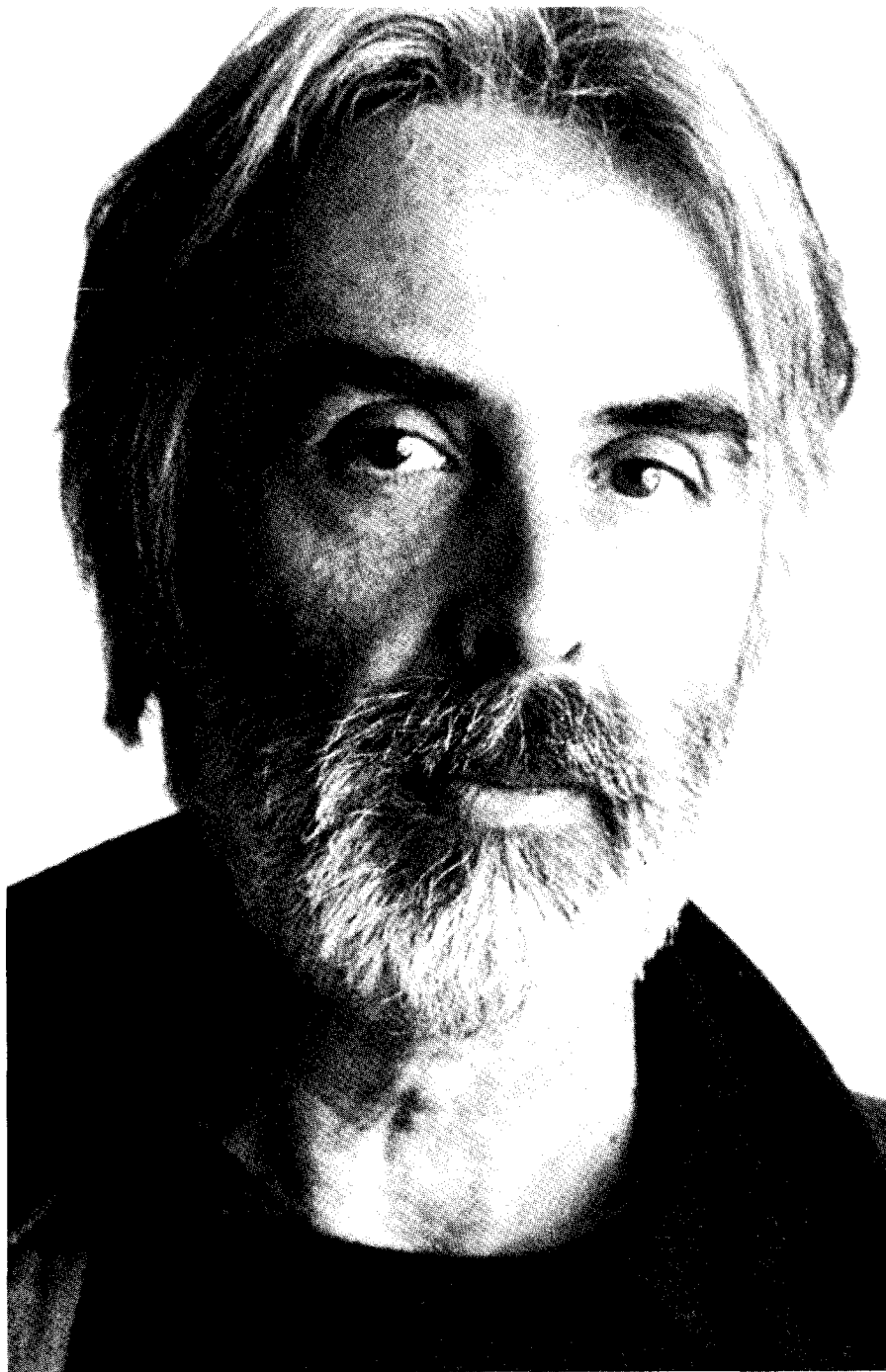


Of Nonexisting Continents

The Cinema of MICHAEL HANEKE. By Amos Vogel



My idol is Bresson. My films are polemical statements against the American "taking-by-surprise-before-one-can-think" cinema and its dis-empowerment of the spectator. It is an appeal for a cinema of

insistent questioning in place of false because too quick answers, for clarifying distance in place of violating nearness. I want the spectator to think.

—Michael Haneke

Forget wine, women, and song; the Austrian director Michael Haneke's cinema is light-years away. Administering an unexpected shock, it stands at the opposite pole from Hollywood's artificial, closed universes, in which everything is ultimately explicable. The massive, odious cultural weight of our cinematic capital is such we literally tend to forget that other narrative strategies and formal-visual structures are possible. Instead, Haneke's cinema reveals a bizarre affinity to the sunless works of Bresson: a tragic world view and no "explanations"; we "see" things, but narrative, dialogue, visuals at best offer clues, never answers.

Born in 1942, Haneke studies psychology and philosophy at the University of Vienna, becomes a film and theater critic, then a theater director in Berlin, Munich, Vienna, directing Strindberg, Goethe, Bruckner, Kleist. Beginning in 1974, Haneke creates a number of works for television, then turns to filmmaking in 1989 with his feature *The Seventh Continent*, selected for presentation at Cannes (and shown in the 1990 New Directors/New Films series at the Museum of Modern Art). The first in a trilogy, it is followed by *Benny's Video* ('92)—shown at the New York Film Festival that year—and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* ('94), again a Cannes Film Festival selection.

The unnamed Austrian cities shown in the trilogy handily stand in for Haneke's view of all of the industrialized Western world: rampant, all-encompassing technology, consumerism triumphant, total alienation, dysfunctional human beings at all times under television's baneful eye, profound existential coldness.

In the extreme, austere *The Seventh Continent*, we meet a well-to-do Austrian family that has everything—and nothing: an expensive car, all the latest appliances, large-screen TV monitors, microwave ovens. They silently deal

with automated checkout counters, gas pumps, ultramodern furniture, a mechanized garage door (repeatedly shown opening and closing). Father, mother, and daughter have almost completely stopped talking to each other. There is no joy, no humanity; but everything is up-to-date. Haneke shows their mundane, daily existence in numbing, almost entirely silent detail. We have no inkling of where we are going, but we don't like it.

The editing and camerawork are extremely unorthodox. Much of the time, faces are not shown, or if at all,

clear, uninflected closeups and longshots; everything is just a little too tight and too clear. The manner at first seems merely obsessive, then becomes truly mad."

Mysteriously, the mood changes. A trip to the "Seventh Continent" seems contemplated—to unwind, to get back to normal?—but there are only six continents. Nevertheless, we are several times treated to a silent image of a rocky shoreline, a mythical dream landscape empty of human beings and bathed in a spectral light. In reality, however, the husband suddenly begins

onhand application of formal style to some notion of content. It is rather a poetic of image and sound emerging uniquely from a direct encounter with human pain and the desire for something, some place, that cannot be had"—the Seventh Continent.

The Austrian film scholar Alexander Horwath, in his book on Haneke, perceptively notes that the film represents a "risky demonstration or a boundary-transgression," and also stresses that the family's "fetishistic, not at all liberating destruction of the previously fetishized objects anticipates death."



At left: BENNY'S VIDEO. Here: 71 FRAGMENTS...

The second film in the trilogy, *Benny's Video*, is perhaps the most accessible, ultimately most horrific film of the three. What Haneke thrusts on us is our, not Austria's, problem. Young Benny, in his affluent parents' plush apartment, spends his life in his room completely enmeshed in video equipment, monitors, camcorders, thus seeming to exercise what escapes him outside: total control. All shades are drawn at all times; instead of seeing the world outside, he records it 24 hours a day and projects it onto TV screens placed in front of the blinds; an anonymous six-lane highway forever filled with traffic and anonymous high-rises beyond. Benny studies, forward, backward, and at different speeds, the farmyard killing of a hog with a stun-gun, displaying not the slightest emotion, though it is the taking of life and the magical, repeated return of the dead that is mysteriously invoked by the camera. At a videostore he meets a girl he has frequently observed silently staring at a TV set in the store window. His parents away for the weekend, they go to his room. Beautifully rendered, embarrassed attempts at interaction eventuate not in erotic play, but in unpremeditated, senseless murder, using the stun-gun seen in the home video. Though entirely committed outside the camera's range (he records it but we never see the tape), the girl's protracted, pitiful screams, then endless whimpers make this into one of the most harrowing scenes ever. Employing technology, it is Benny himself who—emotionless—ensures the failure of an unconscionable plot to save him concocted by his cynical parents.

This ice-cold, brutal study is rendered in powerful images and laconic montage. Dominant social trends of ali-

only partially. Instead, closeups of objects, of hands. Scenes are cut off before they end or go to sudden blackouts. There are abrupt, "illogical" shifts to new scenes, off-putting viewing angles. There are no establishing shots. The daughter suddenly declares she has gone blind; she hasn't; the mother slaps her; there is no explanation; we must create it. "Discomfort in civilization" could not be more explicitly shown. Even the sex is performed silently, with the voracious television eye ever-present. Anonymity, coldness, alienation amidst a surfeit of commodities and comfort; sentiments and emotions are entirely absent.

Vincent Canby was deadly accurate in comparing the film to the Nouveau Roman in France (Robbe-Grillet) and to Wenders's early works (*The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*) and drawing attention to the "bright, crystal-

systematically dismantling, then destroying the house, the furniture, the gadgets, the huge aquarium, the daughter's art work; a pile of banknotes is torn up and flushed down the toilet. We watch in growing horror and incomprehension. The suicide of the entire family caps the film—and then a shocking title: the film is based on a real event.

The total absence of any explanation—at first annoying and artificial—ultimately leads to much greater audience involvement than can be expected from slick, carefully "explained" Hollywood productions. Yet the extremities to which Haneke goes in withholding information from the audience are ultimately difficult to take or to defend. It is, however, true that this style and cinematic approach lead to a kind of transcendence, a heightened sense of engagement on the part of the spectator. "The power of the images," says Haneke, "is not the sec-

enation, the ubiquity of our image industries, the emergence of “virtual reality,” and the ever-more-“real” illusionary power of film and television. Baudrillard’s simulacra and Debord’s “Society of the Spectacle” have made it ever more simple to remove oneself from contact with the real world (and its inevitable pains) and to instead enter a chimerical universe of shadows and lights far more dramatic—and less dangerous—than reality itself.

Haneke’s iconoclasm and profound moral seriousness is further developed in his *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*. Stylistically and thematically, this is an even more extreme and daring work than *The Seventh Continent*, though one can argue as to how successful it is in its own right.

As in the other parts of the trilogy, the center of the plot is once again an act of violence that lacks a sufficiently explicable psychological or sociological motive: the true story of a 19-year-old student who massacres a number of bank customers, all unknown to him. But this time, instead of giving us, as do the other two films, a “longitudinal” section by means of two family histories, we are presented with the act within the context of a cross-section through the structure of society. Though the case presented is like others so popular in newspapers and tabloids, the horrific thing about it is the growing suspicion on the part of the spectator that this apparently irrational act could have its roots in the way we live.

Haneke feels that while in modernist literature and the other contemporary arts, at the very latest since Kafka, the notion that it is possible to show a holistic representation of reality has become obsolete, ironically, only in film, the most recent and potentially most modern art form, has the state of thinking regarding narrative content, progression, and form remained on a 19th century level. Haneke’s quite extraordinary program note stresses that

what is asserted—whether naïvely or cynically, at all events with financial success—is the comforting illusion of being able to completely describe and thus explain the world. . . . My films should provide a countermodel to the typically American style of total production to be found in contemporary popular cinema, which, in its hermetically sealed illusion of an ultimately intact reality, deprives the spectator of any possibility of critical participa-

tion and interaction and condemns him from the outset to the role of a simple consumer.

Through television and mainstream cinema, the spectator is used to having the world presented to him as something explicable (and he pays the empires of Illusion more than enough money to satisfy this need of his for reassurance). This fact alone makes a narrative style that denies him any such agreement both irritating and productive. As soon as the spectator finds himself out on his own,



confronted with questions that are raised by the narrative, yet without instantly given instructions for interpretation, he feels harassed and begins to fight against it—a productive conflict, in my opinion. The more radically answers are denied to him, the more likely is he to find his own.

Sharing the filmmaker’s discomfort with Hollywood’s prescriptive straitjackets and having championed the “other” cinema all my life, my sympathy for Haneke’s unorthodox project is inevitable. I view it as a largely successful attempt. But I did feel at times—particularly in *The Seventh Continent*—that too much was being withheld and for too long. And I find it significant that *Benny’s Video*—the most accessible, the most fully “explained,” may also be the most fully achieved, most successful film of the trilogy.

At times it seems as if Haneke—opting for the spectator’s freedom to arrive at his own conclusions—does not realize how all cinema, of necessity, even the most radical anti-narrative avant-garde cinema—inevitably implies a modicum of control, if not subjugation: as soon as the first image appears on the screen, the spectator’s attention is forcibly focused on images, events, and sounds not of his own choosing. Thus cinema remains, at all times, a manipulative medium. All filmmaking inevitably

entails control over the spectator; it is the degree and the kind of control that will vary from filmmaker to filmmaker, from film to film. Haneke’s stated intention to have the viewer come to his own insights and explanations presupposes, in its purest form, a level playing field that cannot exist.

However, we must welcome Haneke’s attempt to broaden the scope of cinema, to confront us with new insights, to offer us wondrous intimations of the untapped potentials of this medium. ♦

Amos Vogel was the co-founder and first director of the New York Film Festival and is the author of Film as a Subversive Art.

The Seventh Continent is available on video from Parallel Cinema, Baltimore, 1-800-860-8896.