

The “Glaciation Trilogy” Directed by Michael Haneke from the Perspective of the Theories of Jean Baudrillard

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Abstract: As one of the most celebrated film auteurs of contemporary European cinemas, Austrian film director Michael Haneke has achieved remarkable success at the Cannes International Film Festival. His films always represent the living status of the individuals in the postmodern capitalist society, showing criticism through the reflection on the media. The theory of the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard is highly relevant to the works of Haneke. The key notions of Baudrillard, such as “simulacra” and “hyperreality”, describe the media-dominated postmodern social landscape, as well as reveal the tension between the individual and society in the post-industrial and late capitalist periods. This research is a cross-study of film authorship and sociology. It takes Haneke’s earlier film works, the “glaciation trilogy”, which are *The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Benny’s Video* (1992), and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994) as examples, and analyzes the narrative, symbolism and audio-visual strategies through the theoretical perspective of Baudrillard’s theories. On the one hand, this research examines the Baudrillard themes of postmodernism, hyperreality and media alienation in the cases. On the other hand, it evaluates the cinematic style of Haneke and its relevance to a postmodern film ontology. Through the intertextuality between the works of Haneke and Baudrillard, this study is able to reveal the connection between postmodern sociological theories and contemporary auteur cinemas.

Keywords: Michael Haneke, Jean Baudrillard, the “Glaciation Trilogy”, film authorship

1. Introduction

When it comes to the late bloomers in film history, Austrian director Michael Haneke can be counted as one of them. Haneke finished his full-length debut film, *The Seventh Continent* (1989), at the age of 47, after a relatively unknown stint as a television director [1]. However, Haneke won the Golden Palm at Cannes International Film Festival with *Amour* (2012), and it had been only three years since his last winning of this prize with *The White Ribbon* (2009), which makes him one of the most celebrated European cinema directors at the contemporary age [2]. The auteurist style of Haneke is highly recognizable, such as repressive long takes, alienated characters and random acts of violence. These elements are placed in the context of postmodern society and demonstrate sharp criticism in innovative forms.

In the earliest representative film works of Haneke, the “glaciation trilogy” which are *The Seventh Continent*, *Benny’s Video* (1992), and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994), the media

plays as a symbol of postmodernity runs through it. By foregrounding the modern media such as television, radio and video, Haneke represents the alienated individuals in the postmodern capitalist society in the films. As the underlying theme of the trilogy, the reflection on media can be examined by the famous notion of “simulacra” and “hyperreality” raised by the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard [3]. Therefore, this research will take the case analysis to carry out the cross-study of film authorship and sociology. By analyzing the narrative, symbolism and audio-visual strategies in the three film cases, the research aims to reveal how Haneke’s auteurist style relates to the topics of postmodernism, hyperreality and alienation of the medium. It is divided into three parts: alienated individuals in postmodern society, media as a filter between reality and fiction, and the construction of the postmodern film ontology.

2. *The Seventh Continent: Alienated Individuals in Postmodern Society*

The Seventh Continent is the first feature film of Haneke. The movie focuses on the life of a western middle-class nuclear family, which lives a mechanically repetitive life of material abundance. The first half of the film shows how the family moves through life, playing their respective social roles at home, at work and at school. In the second half, this family destroys everything in their home and commits suicide by taking drugs. At the end of the film, there is only the rustle of the television without a signal. The film can be considered as an allegory about the living condition of alienated individuals in postmodern society. From the perspective of Baudrillard, in modern social life, “the entire system is fluctuating in indeterminacy, all of the reality absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and of simulation. It is now a principle of simulation, and not of reality, that regulates social life. The finalities have disappeared; we are now engendered by models” [3]. Based on this, Baudrillard describes the postmodern social status and the individuals who live in it, which is appropriate for the situation in *The Seventh Continent*.

Firstly, in order to represent the individual in the postmodern social context, the film adopts a unique narrative structure by choosing one day in different years of the family and shooting similar actions in the same camera positions. The repeated space, shot sequence and character movements present a kind of materialized and numbed living state. Secondly, Haneke uses blocked visual symbols to the metaphor that the characters are trapped in their living environment, such as all kinds of food that fill the picture frame and the various modern industrial products presented in close-ups. It is not so much the concrete objects as the symbols of them that haunt people. Last but not least, dialogue is limited to a minimum amount, and the conversations between the family members are often accompanied by the background sound of the car radio or television show. As Kuttentberg comments, it “substitutes interpersonal communication with an impressive repertoire of mass media excerpts, from newspapers to radio and television broadcasts to music” [4]. In *The Seventh Continent*, the media fills the gap left by the aphasia of the modern communities, and thus it seems to form a symbolic background order. This situation is just like the comment of Michell on postmodern society: “it is an epoch of the absorption of all language into images and ‘simulacra’, a semiotic hall of mirrors” [5].

In this social context, Haneke further portrays the figure of the alienated individual, mainly through cinematic language and a symbolic approach. Inspired by Robert Bresson [4], Haneke makes ingenious use of action close-ups. By photographing partial body movements, the complete individual body is replaced by the fragmented image of the body, symbolizing that the human body has become a component of the world of industrial capitalism. The design is consistent with the close-ups of hands in *Pickpocket* (1959) and *Money* (1983), directed by Bresson. Through emphasizing the partial body in such abstract representation, it achieves “the Surrealist critique of bourgeois existence” [6]. So does Haneke, who uses minimalism to represent the body as part of the symbolic world. According to Martin Jay, the hyperreal world of stimulation represents the shaping of reality by images of reality,

in turn, thus distinguishing it from the terms like panopticon or the spectacle, which are “concepts that imply a prior intentionality using visual means for other ends, such as the maintenance of power or the perpetuation of capitalism” [7]. *The Seventh Continent* echoes Baudrillard. It uses the image of the disembodied body as a metaphor to suggest that the individual has become part of the postmodern capitalist landscape rather than merely reproducing capitalist ideology.

The film sets a 15-minute paragraph showing how the family rebels against their plight. In this scene, Haneke uses a series of intense action clips to depict the family destroying every object they own, from curtains to walls, clothes to money, autonomously smashing the shackles of matter. For Kuttentberg, “the act of systematically demolishing one’s home signals more than a radical break with the typical lifestyle in a Western post-industrial consumer society” [4]. However, this climactic suicide is doomed to be in vain. In this scene, there is a shot: when the aquarium is broken, the fish that lose their living environment die in the struggle. The scene implies that even if the external physical reality is destroyed, the alienated individual still cannot achieve self-liberation. At the end of the film, Haneke uses the medium to draw a desperate end to the film: the television with its cable unplugged is no longer playing dazzling programs, only making snowflakes and noises, which refers to the physical nature of the media, symbolizing the deconstruction of the bizarre hyperreality.

3. *Benny’s Video*: Media as a Filter between Reality and Fiction

In Haneke’s second feature film, the medium is not just imagined as a symbolic background, but occupies a more critical and central position. In *Benny’s Video*, Benny, a teenager who enjoys watching violent videos, invites a girl to his home and kills her. The process of killing is recorded on videotape. Later, Benny shows the video of his murder to his parents. To protect their son, Benny’s parents decide to dispose of the body secretly. Then one day, Benny turns in his parents by giving the police a videotape of their cover-up. In this film, Haneke connects two of his key themes: media and violence. In Marshall McLuhan’s opinion, the media owns a neutral quality, that is, the ability to represent reality mechanically. It confuses public perceptions of truth and fiction. For McLuhan, what affects people is not the content carried by the media but its form [8]. It can be said that the sin in *Benny’s Video* points to the media.

Welsch uses the television news coverage of the Gulf War as an example of the caution of Baudrillard; that is, the pixel technology used in television news owns a quality of delusion because the reality of the victims of war is not actually shown. This undoubtedly distorts people’s belief in so-called reality because they do not know whether they are witnessing a replay of reality or a simulation [9]. Furtherly, he continues to illustrate the unreliability of media-reality experience: “The difference between the representation and the simulation of reality is becoming less and less evident and tending to lose significance. Accordingly, the media themselves increasingly present their pictures in modes of virtuality and playfulness” [9]. Similarly, in *Benny’s Video*, media is represented as a filter between reality and fiction. Television news broadcasts incessantly of war and conflict, and mainstream cinemas consume and even glorify violence. As the agent between reality and fiction, media filter everything and generate their simulacra, including violence. By representing violent scenes, Haneke actually criticizes the simulacra world in the electronic age as a symbolic game that lacks ethical autonomy.

Benny, the protagonist of the film, lives in a world dependent on media. He observes and understands reality through all kinds of mediums and even communicates with his parents by taking videos. Benny is a fan of violent images, while the media have long since stripped away the ethical dimension of violence. Like all alienated individuals in the cinema works of Haneke, he exhibits a “random act of hostility”. In Bauman’s reaffirmation of Baudrillard’s view of the negative effects of simulacra, he believes that “as the ‘not for real’ becomes fast the standard for the ‘for real’, the aesthetic criteria proper for the world of play and amusement may well displace the now irrelevant

moral criteria, at home in the world of human interaction” [10]. Benny and the victim girl’s mutual provocation makes it difficult for the audience to tell whether this is an accident or a deliberate murder. By keeping the motives of the characters vague, the movie deliberately makes the whole process seems a playful game.

Benny’s Video explores how the media blurs the line between the real and the virtual, not only through representing the brutal actions of the protagonists but also by chandlerring the audience. According to Price and Rhodes, the cinemas of Haneke often associate the passion of sadism with the pleasure of voyeurism [11]. In the scene of Benny killing the girl, the director does not directly present violence. Viewers can only watch this scene from a camera of Benny. At the same time, Benny keeps pushing the girl out of the picture frame to commit violence, which induces the desire for voyeurism in the viewer, as if implying that the audience is complicit. Haneke has acknowledged the importance of *Salo* (1976), directed by Pier Pasolini, which not only unabashedly presents the brutality and inhumanity of the violence but also provocatively casts a reverse gaze on the viewer [12]. In such an extreme way, the director intentionally uses the cinematic medium as a means to challenge the viewer. As an extension of *Benny’s Video*, Haneke later created *Funny Games* (1997), a reality-show-like film that mixes documentary, sadism and gaming.

4. 71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance: A Postmodernist Film Ontology

In the final part of the “glaciation trilogy”, the importance of the media is further upgraded and related to the film ontology. The narrative structure of *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* is, corresponds with the film title, made up of 71 scattered fragments of life. These fragments come from individuals with no social connections with each other: a border-crossing vagrant, a pair of couples trying to adopt children, an older man who lives alone, and a student who behaves erratically. At the end of the story, the student shoots the others in a bank, and the television news reports that the motive of the murderer is unknown. From the narrative level of the film, Haneke intends to reflect the social symptoms of collective communication inability through the divided group images. However, the formal level of the film reveals something more profound. It reflects a postmodern concept of reality, which leads to a kind of film ontology that is different from the traditional style of realism.

For Andre Bazin, an important film theorist who highly advocates a realistic style, cinema is subordinate to reality and ought to be infinitely close to reality [13]. However, in the media-dominated postmodern society, the simulacra produced by mass media are far from simply copying or representing reality but creating a hyperreality that parallels it [3]. According to the distinction between representation and simulacra raised by Baudrillard, representation refers to the copy of the original, in which the original has real value, while the value of the representation is dependent. Differently, simulacra mean a copy with no original works. For example, In large-scale modern industrial production, each mechanically reproduced car is worth the same [3]. Through the concept of simulacra, Baudrillard explains that the representation of the real or the original is no longer important in postmodern society. It is in this sense that the film ontology of the faithful representation of reality advocated by Bazin fails. However, to respond to such a social context, *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* shows a different way compared to other popular works of mass media.

In this film, what Haneke tries to do is not to create a copy of reality with cinematographic images but to launch a rebellion against traditional realism under the premise of grasping the deception of mainstream media. He disassembles reality into fragments and then restructures it. Initially, compared with the conventional linear narrative, the film adopts a multi-clue narrative and highly fragments the content, deliberately causing narrative incoherence. The plots of the film are loosely connected, sometimes even irrelevant. Haneke clearly has no intention of providing audiences with the narrative pleasure of a Hollywood movie. Instead, he forces the viewer to rely on the fragments to perceive things as they do in real life. Furtherly, Haneke distances himself from traditional realism by adopting

much audio-visual language with a distancing effect. For example, the dark scenes cut in suddenly as a transition, which deepens the sense of break in the narrative. Moreover, there are scenes in which the characters maintain a single action in one shot for a long time, such as the three-minute ping-pong practice and the 88-second close-up of the bleeding. The use of extremely long takes by Haneke here is at odds with the realistic principles advocated by Bazin because it does not aim to represent the complete space-time [13]. Instead, the long takes can be considered as larger fragments, symbolizing multiple dilemmas in postmodern society.

According to Baudrillard, representation “tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation”, while simulation “envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum” [3]. Therefore, rather than producing copies of reality and reproducing simulacra like the mass media, such as television news and mainstream cinemas, Haneke chose a new way to respond to reality by collaging the fragments of it. The contingency and ambiguity of this method point to the state of postmodern society. The game of “picking chopsticks” in the film is a perfect metaphor for the postmodern film ontology of Haneke. The chopsticks fall down randomly and cling to each other, symbolizing the accidental nature of reality. At the end of the film, the television news coverage juxtaposes different unrelated events: the bank killing, the Christmas Eve celebration and the child molestation case of Michael Jackson. Through the news, the director alludes to the absurdity of the simulacra world.

5. Conclusions

Through the theoretical vision of Jean Baudrillard, this research reviews the “glaciation trilogy”, the early works of Michael Haneke. In *The Seventh Continent*, the media is imagined as a symbolic background order. Under the alienation of modern media, the symbol of reality replaces reality itself, and the individual body becomes the component of the postmodern capitalist landscape. In *Benny’s Video*, the medium is seen as a filter that confuses reality with fiction. By affecting public perception of reality, one of the negative effects caused by it is the dissolution of the ethical dimension of violence; In *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, Haneke aims to subvert the media-shaped hyperreality and construct a postmodern film ontology. With its emphasis on contingency and ambiguity, the cinematic form of Haneke shows a tendency to deconstruct reality, which makes him distinguishable from traditional realistic style.

On the one hand, since the beginning of the “glaciation trilogy”, the reflection on media has been a permanent theme in the cinemas of Haneke. His cinema works either put the media in the background to suggest the survival dilemma of individuals or direct the cameras at the medium, generating intuitive self-reflexivity. It is in the media-dominated postmodern simulacra context that Haneke has formed his auteurist topic and content. The self-destruction and loss of control in the “glaciation trilogy” do not require logical motivations because the repressed contradictions are deeply rooted in postmodern society. The gratuitous violence in the cinemas of Haneke is a random social symptom hidden beneath the glaciers of everyday life in the postmodern world.

On the other hand, for the auteurist style of Michael Haneke in the trilogy, the word “glaciation” relates not only to emotional non-intervention but as well as to his calm, hidden audio-visual strategy. Inspired by the techniques of modernist film auteurs, such as Robert Bresson’s action close-up and Pierre Pasolini’s method of reverse gaze, Haneke forms his own auteurist style, that is, using not only objective but also deconstructive cinematic language to challenge the postmodern simulacra reality and the perception of the audience. In the process of constructing his postmodern film ontology, Haneke tends to arrange open images in films, retaining the ambiguity and polysemy of cinema and returning the right of interpretation to the viewer. Through his auteur cinema, the audiences are able to reflect on the boundaries between reality and fiction, along with various mechanisms of power in postmodern society.

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