

The Weaponized Realism of Michael Haneke's *The Seventh Continent*

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The calculated and confrontational debut from legendary Austrian director Michael Haneke, *The Seventh Continent* represents a fascinating mutation of realism, depicting a starkly naturalistic descent into a repressed sense of madness. The film makes an impressive commitment to naturalistic aesthetics yet still creates a heightened sense of reality, deriving an overarching atmosphere of dread from Haneke's literal approach to visuals. While some may balk at the film's nihilistic ending, slow pacing, and monotonous plotting, what is undeniable in all these aspects and more is this film's adherence to Andre Bazin's sense of cinematic realism. *The Seventh Continent* presents a weaponization of Bazin's theory of neorealism, blending the tenets of his theories with aspects of horror while rarely diverging from Bazin's set of structural rules regarding direction and depiction. Bazin's concepts of reality in film are utilized as a foundation on which Haneke builds his own unique atmospheric work and biting social commentary, creating a film indebted to the tenets of realist theory yet with its own unique spin on these ideas.

For some background on *The Seventh Continent*, the film was Haneke's first major work, released in 1989 to acclaim and controversy. The film became the Austrian entry for that year's Best Foreign Language film at the Academy Awards, among many other honors, however it received backlash from general audiences for its violent content and atypical story. Inspired by a news article Haneke had read, the film depicts scenes spanning three years in the lives of a mother (Birgit Doll), father (Dieter Berner), and daughter (Leni Tanzer), focusing on menial tasks like chores, shopping, bathing, working, and going to school, before an explosive final act in which the family isolates themselves in their home, destroys all of their material belongings, and commits a ritualistic suicide. A bleak commentary on consumerism, the film utilizes the depictions of minute everyday tasks to create a sense of dread, substituting the traditional horror buildup.

With a general understanding of the film established, Bazin's theories must be introduced. His first writing, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, laid out his views on the potentials and zeniths of the photographic medium. Positing that photography, above all other art forms, was most capable of capturing reality, he emphasized the powerful aesthetic approximation of real life the medium provides. "The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities" (Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, 8) preaches Bazin, extolling his belief of cinema's ultimate goal of preserving and elevating our own reality. To him, the photographic process meant an automatic recreation of the world, one untouched by the subjectivity of the human hand present in paintings and other art. He found in this medium the conceptual ability to make men immortal and forever preserve a moment in the world. In this regard, photography ranks foremost in all arts for its distinct ability to "embalm reality," exceeding the potential of all other visual arts, producing "an image that is a reality of nature, namely, an hallucination that is also a fact" (Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, 9.) Whatever the film, Bazin insists that an essential degree of reality will always be present in a film's perfect automatic ability to capture a moment, however real.

Building on this initial writing, Bazin would formulate ideas on a particular rhythm and language to cinema in his next writing, *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*. Charting the development of film through the 1920s-40s, Bazin initially emphasizes the elevating quality of cinema, containing the potential to not just capture and emphasize reality, but reveal an extended and heightened reality. "Through the contents of the image and the resources of montage, the cinema has at its disposal a whole arsenal of means whereby to impose its interpretation of an event on the spectator" (Bazin, *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*, 26) elaborates Bazin.

By utilizing strength of image and effective montage technique, cinema contains a power over and obligation towards reality, with the potential to reveal newfound depth and innate meaning through sequencing, association, and the power of individual images as objects. This relationship between montage and image forms an essential foundational language of cinema in early years, one that could evolve naturally to fit subject matter, usually in relation to the burgeoning Hollywood sphere of cinema.

However, with the emergence of new talents and more mature subjects, these notions of the language of cinema began to change. Deep focus and one-take techniques gained more prominence with the arrival of game-changing talents like Orson Welles, whose directorial innovations allowed for a reassessment of the necessity of montage and the concept of cinematic reality. “Dramatic effects for which we had formerly relied on montage were created out of the movements of the actors within a fixed framework” (Bazan, *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*, 33) describes Bazin. No longer was montage the definitive anchor in film language, instead lengthier takes and more emphasis on the broad-scale content of a scene became an effective and grounding alternative. Bazin would go so far as to call this one-take technique superior to the cut, providing a more effective period for dramatic mechanism and its analysis. Cinema could still reveal a newfound depth to reality, but with these new techniques it could do so in a more comprehensive and effective format. Beyond changing cinematic language, Bazin even posited a change in psychological association between the film and audiences, with deep focus and extended takes creating more relation between the reality of the viewer and the reality onscreen, bringing “the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality” (Bazan, *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*, 35) in the words of Bazin. Meanwhile, removing montage means stripping away the overbearing implications of the Kuleshov effect, returning a sense of ambiguity to cinema. No longer are a character's emotions blatantly externalized nor sequences spelled out to the letter, instead these longer takes allow the audience to apply their own emotions and interpretations to the film, creating an even stronger link between the cinematic and audience realities. These new methods prompt a more active involvement from the audience, no longer deriving the extension of reality from blatant montage but instead from audience input. Ultimately, Bazin argues, it is these newly utilized techniques of long takes, deep focus, and the power of the individual image, that directorial excess of cinema reaches its most prominent sense of reality.

With the essentials of Bazin's theory established, a research method regarding the presence of these techniques in *The Seventh Continent* must be outlined. Given the specificity of modern technique in Bazin's theories, particularly in terms of take length and depth of focus, it is necessary to break down individual sequences exemplary of Haneke's directorial approach to the film. The film features abundant long-takes, a foundational component to Bazin's audience psychological involvement and overall concept of realism, thus several instances of this technique will be explained, interpreted, and related to both Bazin's theory and the efficacy of the film. In a similar vein, the breaking of montage technique will be discussed in several key examples, relating to Bazin's concept of both stripping away the Kuleshov effect to promote audience interpretation, and the idea that every image is its own distinct object within the film. In an overarching sense, the ambiguity of several sequences will be discussed, both as a major component in Bazin's theory of effective cinematic reality, and the effectiveness of Haneke's atmosphere and messaging. Lastly, alongside each discussion will be an analysis of the way Haneke builds upon the essential foundations Bazin establishes in his theories, utilizing advanced

cinematic technique, ambiguity, and audience involvement to create an atmosphere of dread and unease.

Following this thread of building upon Bazin's foundations, an article entitled *Bazin's Modernism* by Daniel Morgan for Edinburgh University Press discusses the concept of a post-Bazin concept of realism in film. Expanding on Bazin's established respect and discussion of Orson Welles' films *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, Morgan attempts to apply Bazin's theory to the subsequent, more stylized works of Welles, with films like *The Lady from Shanghai* and *Touch of Evil* making use of elaborate tracking shots, noir aesthetics, and active camera movement. Rather than labeling these films as breaking with realist ideals, Morgan posits that these later-career methods build upon the same techniques of both Welles' first films and those outlined by Bazin, positing that Welles' "treats realism as a stable ground, a kind of basic convention against which his tracking shots and other tricks can take shape" (Morgan, 25.) Rather than giving into more conventional non-realist techniques, Welles is evolving his style to meld realism with more genre-savvy techniques, creating an evolutionary step towards modernism. The essential idea behind this article is the foundational quality of realism; that Bazin's theories are not a definitive enclosure but an inspirational guideline for cinema, on which directors can and are continuing to build increasingly complex techniques.

With methodology and similar thesis applications in mind, it's time to at last begin discussion of *The Seventh Continent*. What becomes immediately clear from the film's opening sequence is Haneke's love of holding onto visuals. Long takes are abundant and compounding, often mirroring each other over the course of the film. Beginning with minor examples, extended takes featuring mirroring shots of garage doors opening and closing are featured at the 8, 20, and 53 minute marks, ranging from 20 seconds to 1 minute in length, an almost 45 second sequence of father Dieter Berner showering around 21 minutes in, a nearly 2 minute long take of elementary school gymnastics around the 43 minute mark, a 3 minute shot of cereal being prepared and eaten at the 54:30 mark, all just to name a few. The film is full of extended sequences, anywhere from 20 seconds to a full 5 minutes, Haneke rarely lets a shot pass by quickly. The length, banal subject matter, static unmoving camera position, and distanced, half-shot or full-shot framing creates a feeling of naturalism, as if the audience is peering into a fully-lived life. The repeated shots in particular help establish a sense of routine, as tasks are carried out to their fullest several times over. Applying Bazin's theory, these extended takes help draw the audience into the film, allowing us to apply our understanding of monotonous everyday activity, be it chores, studying, or a job and sympathize with the events onscreen, assigning our own emotions and understanding to scenes that for all intents and purposes appear taken right out of a normal suburban life. The direct, everyday visuals in these scenes allows the audience to begin associating their reality with the onscreen reality, establishing a throughline for the audience to feel the rising tension and stress these ceaseless scenes of work conjure. It's as if Haneke has used Bazin's ideas of audience involvement in long takes to craft a trap, in which long exposure to such monotonous yet calculatingly framed images can produce a sense of unease and dissociation. The article titled *Haneke, the Long Take, Realism*, by John David Rhodes for Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, addresses this idea directly, applying Bazin's theories to another Haneke film, *Code Unknown*, he describes this particular technique of audience entrapment in the line "Haneke stages sustained acts of vision- perhaps, merely, of seeing. Our participation in these produces a recognition of the way that cinema forces us to stand outside its images, to experience the unknown-ness of the world, our own strangeness to ourselves" (Rhodes, 20.) By utilizing Bazin's ideas of audience participation in long-takes,

Haneke has created a method in which we become so engrossed in the monotony we begin to lose ourselves in a disorienting, anxious haze, in the case of *The Seventh Continent* punctuated only by the film's final cutting final act. It is in this last act the audience reaches one of the film's most iconic and lengthy long-takes, a scene in which Dieter Berner flushes the family's funds down their toilet at the 1 hour 30 minute mark. Shot in a closeup on the bowl and lasting nearly 4 minutes, the scene is initially quite shocking, and marks the beginning of the family's descent towards the end. The content may initially seem confrontational, however the length, deemphasized framing, and lack of reaction from Berner seem aimed at dismissing the audience's negative emotions, with the ambiguity of Berner's actions and the downplayed portrayal of the sequence potentially making the audience more comfortable with each minute. Haneke's aim here and in these other takes is to seemingly make the everyday uncomfortable and the uncomfortable everyday, creating long-takes utilizing Bazin's foundational theory to draw in audiences, then using static, almost voyeuristic camerawork to subtly guide audiences towards discomfort.

In terms of montage technique and construction of images, Haneke is extremely frank with his visuals. Very little is left to symbolism or suggestion, with Haneke deriving power from the stark, realistic presentation of images and sequences. Particularly striking is a sequence beginning at 17:30 minutes, in which Dieter Berner and Birgit Doll go shopping. The scene itself depicts a very ordinary chain of events, with shots depicting the couple selecting their items, filling their cart, and ringing up their purchase, with the order of shots eschewing any of the propulsion or deeper meaning of parallel, accelerated, or attraction montages. In the words of Bazin, this is a sequence in which "every image is to be seen as an object and every object as an image" (Bazan, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, 9.) A cash register is just a cash register, a receipt is just a receipt. The unease of the sequence comes not from some deeper symbolic meaning or particular shot association in a montage, but instead from the stark monotony, the materialist grind, and the grounded implication of meaningless exchange the frankness of these images communicates. A feeling of unease is derived from each isolated shot as much as their placement together, aligning with Bazin's ideas of the value of individual shots, with Haneke constructing an atypical style of tension building on that realist foundation. A similar sequence unfolds in the film's final act, beginning at 1:17:19, as the family begins to systematically destroy their home and belongings. Like the supermarket sequence, each shot exists as an object in itself, unconcerned with any greater montage. In one shot Birgit Doll methodically cuts up her clothing, strewing strips of cloth around her room. In another, Dieter Berner demolishes a wardrobe with a sledgehammer. In yet another, Leni Tanzer tears up her picture books, throwing them to the floor. Haneke allows each shot to carry out just long enough to unsettle the viewer before cutting to the next one, placing emphasis on the individual shots, rather than their placement together. It is precisely because these scenes are presented in such a stark and unstylized manner that they are so distinctly troubling. Divorced from any stylized, meaning-heavy montage, these visuals feel disorienting and disturbing, yet entirely grounded in reality. To quote Bazin, "the uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image." (Bazan, *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*, 36.) It's this uncertainty in these isolated images that lends the sequence its unnerving power, Haneke wielding Bazin's anti-montage realism like a blunt instrument against the audience.

Regarding this uncertainty and ambiguity, Haneke devotes great effort to avoiding the Kuleshov effect, rarely letting the audience into the heads of the main trio, preserving Bazin's

much desired ambiguity. A particularly compelling sequence takes place at 29:15 minutes, in which a visiting relative (Udo Samel) breaks down in tears during dinner. The reaction is almost completely without buildup, Haneke resolutely refusing to give context or explanation in the sequence. The unexplained outburst from Samel is contrasted by the traditionally framed reactions of the rest of the family, as if Haneke is deliberately barring us from Samel's thoughts but taunting the audience with the reactions of those around him. Further adding to the strangeness, a sequence just a minute later focuses on closeups of each family member, completely placid and expressionless, as they watch television. It seems as if Haneke is creating a distance between the true internal state of his characters and the audience, almost challenging the viewers to assign their own meaning to the bizarre events they just witnessed. Stripping away the excess of the Kuleshov effect and needless montage, Haneke creates emotion in a vacuum, eliciting an intrigued and potentially apprehensive reaction from the audience, aiming to, in the words of Bazin, "give back to the cinema a sense of ambiguity of reality" ((Bazin, *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*, 37.) A parallel sequence occurs at the 50 minute mark, in which Birgit Doll spontaneously breaks down into a similar crying fit, her gasping sobs contrasted by the complete expressionlessness of Berner and Tanzer. It marks another instance of Haneke creating a shock of emotion completely without context and entirely unacknowledged by others. It immediately incites a curiosity and unease in the viewer, challenging the audience to decipher Doll's outburst and understand the complete lack of reaction. The sheer emotional contrast produces an eerie and unsettling effect, Haneke perfectly utilizing Bazin's ambiguity for his own sinister purposes.

Ultimately the power of *The Seventh Continent* comes from its unique mutations on Bazin's classic tenets of realism. Where Bazin conceptualized the theory as a method of best capturing and preserving a moment, Haneke has seemingly repurposed the theory as a method of solidifying a moment, sharpening it, and descending on the viewer in a frenzy. Whatever Haneke's intentions may be, this repurposing of essential theory is what makes this discussion so worthwhile. The distinct mutation of realism in this film illustrates that film theory creates fluid, abstract logic that provides a healthy framework for new voices to take form. Bazin's theory is ever evolving, spreading into modernism, melding with horror, and undoubtedly being completely redefined by the digital age. There is no definitive theory that can limit cinematic creation, no system that can perfectly encapsulate how to create a film, instead there are foundations and guidelines to follow, to break, or to synthesize, creating a product as unique or as traditional as the director wills. Haneke's synthesis of Bazin's theories in particular shows that realism is a simple foundation, a texture within filmmaking to be blended with countless other elements, a touchstone for countless innovations realized and still to come. Bazin's comprehensive writings have laid the groundwork, and it seems that each successive generation of filmmakers has created their own unique synthesis of realism, from Welles to Haneke to Cassavetes to Safdie to directors yet to come.

The Seventh Continent presents a fascinating evolution of Bazin's theories of realism, converting foundational cinematic concepts of reality into an intense and obfuscated experience that thrives on ambiguity and audience input. The tenets of realism are turned into traps, twists, and challenges for the viewer, representing a director building their own unique vision on essential film theory; a meeting of the classical and the modernist to create a wholly unique and undeniably challenging product.

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