

Educational transformation and the force of film: Viewing Michael Haneke's *The Seventh Continent*

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Introduction

In recent years, educational philosophy has sought new modes of inquiry with which to respond to our current conditions. In light of the diagnosis of our being immunized from the world and its problems, these experimental and empirical practices often take their cue from Arendt's call to find a way to move in the gap between past and future. These experimental practices have used film-making and film-viewing, in particular, as means to attend to the present and to counter our immunization from it.¹ The work of this article connects to this recent trend in educational philosophy. The inquiry this article is based on arises out of our viewing of the film *The Seventh Continent*,² and the conditions of this viewing. We share with these other engagements with film a concern with the possibility of (personal) transformation and (societal) change and take seriously the idea of an "education of grown-ups"³ as expressed by Stanley Cavell, in which change is conceived as transformation of the self (what Cavell calls a continual search for a next self⁴), or alternatively the idea of work on the self, as expressed by scholars such as Michel Foucault and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This article sets out how we conceive of (educational) transformation of the subject in relation to the viewing of the film *The Seventh Continent*.

The film, the conditions of its viewing, and our questions

The film, which is based on a true story, depicts the daily lives and routines of a family – mother, father, and daughter – which end when the father and mother administer a lethal dose of drugs, first to their daughter, then to themselves, and end their lives. This takes place after the systematic destruction of the interior of the home. Although chosen in part for its focus on a family, and the questions raised by the parents' actions, it was also the type of film it is – broadly speaking a non-Hollywood film – that made it appropriate to the particular educational setting in which it was viewed.

The film was viewed at a bi-annual postgraduate seminar, where participants present work-in-progress, read texts, and watch a film suggested by participants as having educational-philosophical force or relevance, which participants then discuss. This is a specific educational

context, therefore, though not one in which a particular “reading” of a film is taught. There are no outcomes associated with viewing the film, but the viewing and subsequent discussions already stem from a shared interest in certain issues, questions, etc. about education, educational theory, and one’s own projects, and from a shared expectation (or hope) that they will illuminate some aspects of the issues, provide partial answers to the questions, alleviate some of the uncertainty. So, nor is it a “neutral,” dis-interested viewing and discussing.

The inquiry in this article also stems from a shared experience that the films used in that seminar “work” differently for all viewers: some seem to be strongly affected by the films, others not. Some express that they don’t “see it,” or are puzzled about what is going on (in the film, or with others’ reactions), or, simply, don’t “feel” strongly about it. More generally, this is often our experience when such films are used in formal educational settings, particularly when the film is “compulsory.”

Against this background, our interest in *The Seventh Continent* is not to assess claims seemingly made by the depiction of events and characters in it, nor with how to get viewers to experience or read film in a particular way. Our educational concern lies with the potential for transformation this film makes possible. In light of this, the article attempts to respond to the claims this film made on us as viewers. More accurately, it is an articulation of its claims. Our articulation is motivated by the following questions relating to the film’s transformative, i.e. educational, potential: 1) Where does the film’s force, i.e. beyond simply its unsettling subject matter, derive from?; and 2) How exactly is the viewer’s subjectivity put at stake? We develop our response with reference to Cavell’s work on the ontology of film in *The World Viewed*.⁵ His account of film helps us, not by offering an “explanatory framework,” but because his account of subjectivity in relation to film resonates with our experiences of viewing *The Seventh Continent*, and allows us to give particular expression to the educational questions that concern us.

Cavell, modern subjectivity, and the promise of film

Cavell’s discussion of film in *The World Viewed* is set in “a large-scale philosophical-historical narrative ... concerning the unhinging of consciousness from the world.”⁶ As Cavell puts this:

At some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and the presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation. The route to conviction in reality was through the acknowledgement of that endless presence of self.⁷

This is most evident in Kant. We only know of the world that which we ourselves have put in it; objectivity is transcendental-subjectivity. In William Rothman and Marian Keane's terms:

It is our subjectivity, not the world we objectively apprehend, that appears present to us. Nor do we objectively apprehend our subjectivity; our subjectivity, too, appears present to us only subjectively, as if our consciousness has come unhinged from our subjectivity no less than from the world.⁸

Philosophically and existentially this manifests itself as a sense of isolation. This "new fact of our condition"⁹ induces an intense desire, i.e. "the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation – a wish for the power to reach this world."¹⁰ But the modern subject's predicament is such that any attempt at getting closer to the world only amounts to a further explicating of its very subjectivity. It can acknowledge only its own "endless presence."¹¹

Cavell understands art in connection to this: "[E]very art wants the expression of the world, to speak the being of it directly."¹² Since the Reformation, art's history is a history of trying to reproduce the world, to recover "what modern philosophy has told us (whether for Kant's reasons, or for Locke's, or Hume's) is metaphysically beyond our reach or (as Hegel or Marx or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche might rather put it) beyond our reach metaphysically."¹³ But it does not (cannot) succeed in this recovery. Expressionism e.g. is "a representation of our *response* to this new fact of our condition – our terror of ourselves in isolation – rather than ... a representation of the world from within the condition of isolation itself."¹⁴ An expressionist painting does not depict the world; it depicts the painter's "perspective of/on" the world. If it is a representation, it is a representation not of the world, but of what the painter is seeing, a visualization of what is in the painter's eyes.

The particularity of film as an art form is its seeming to succeed in "[speaking] the being of the world directly."¹⁵ Film seems to satisfy "the wish for the magical reproduction of the world."¹⁶ Through its photographic nature, or specifically the automatism inherent to its photographic nature, film seems to succeed in this restoration of a connection deemed lost:

Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting but escape it altogether: by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.¹⁷

Because of its automatism, the photograph seems to suggest that it depicts the world itself, not the photographer's "image" of that world: "Photographs are not hand-made; they are manufactured. And what is manufactured is an image of the world."¹⁸

But for Cavell it is precisely these features – the automatism and what the camera shows, by which it seems to reproduce the world – that reveal our disconnection from it. Ontologically, what we see in a photograph are things that are not present to us. Hence, Cavell says: "Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it."¹⁹ Instead of establishing conviction in the reality shown, film thus confronts us with a "mechanical defeat of our presence to that reality."²⁰

For Cavell, during the 1960s, film began "moving into the modernist environment."²¹ This is significant because this expresses film's "growing doubt of its ability to allow the world to exhibit itself."²² What characterizes this move isn't so much "new possibilities of the cinematic medium," as a "mechanical intensification of the known quantities of filming."²³ Films are "dressed up, with fancier cutting and dreamier color and extremer angles and more explicit dialogue,"²⁴ what Cavell later calls a "theatricalizing of its images."²⁵ This reinforces the "loss of conviction in the film's capacity to carry the world's presence."²⁶ By using certain techniques and devices (e.g. using particular music as cues to significant points) film has "[taken] over the task of exhibition, against its nature," instead of "[allowing] the world to exhibit itself."²⁷ But interestingly, at this very point, Cavell also leaves open a certain possibility: "But the same techniques which serve to betray it can also be used, and seen, to keep faith with its nature ... that there *are* serious uses of these devices"²⁸

This distinction, "between the commodity and the serious work,"²⁹ is not a matter of simply valuing traditional over modern, as high over low culture. Nor is it claiming that film is, after all, capable of establishing the lost connection. Rather, it draws attention to distinctive possibilities of film, as a form of art, to assert the world in a certain way. Film has the capacity, he says, "to let the world and its children achieve their candidness."³⁰ In our attention to *The Seventh Continent* here we are concerned not with the particular devices that Cavell refers to – e.g. close-ups, slow motion, flash insets, and freeze frames³¹ – but rather with the film's own execution of the possibility of allowing this "candidness." We discuss below the particular devices used by *The Seventh Continent*, which constitute its candidness, in order to articulate from where the film derives its force.

The Seventh Continent: the force of its devices of exposition

The following devices, we argue, give the film its force and constitute its capacity for educational transformation: repetition of the same “doings;” prolonged close-ups (of hands, tools, ...); and the use of diegetic sounds.³²

A focus on daily domestic activities, and the repetition of many of these, focuses our attention on the familiar rituals that make and maintain the home: the alarm goes off, the news comes on the radio, we say “Morning” to our partner, put on our robe and slippers, draw the curtains, open the bedroom door, go to the bathroom, clean our teeth, make coffee, tell the children to get dressed, pack our briefcase, eat breakfast, drive to school and work, go to the supermarket, fill the car with petrol, do our homework, watch TV, take a shower, eat dinner, put the children to bed, sleep. We do it all again the next day.

These mundane activities are shown, not in quick succession, but at a pace that maintains our focus on them, forcing us to look; for example, when the protagonists leave or enter the house, we see, from their point of view in the car, the opening of the automated garage door, and then, its firm closure behind them. And this is shown a number of times. We are shown, furthermore, the *doing* of these activities: the camera shows the hands of the mother as she makes coffee, the hands of the father as he ties his shoelaces, the feet of the mother as she puts on her slippers. We are not, at first, shown the faces of the mother and the father. In the supermarket, for example, we are shown the hands of the mother as she puts food in the trolley, the hands of the butcher hacking at the cut of meat, and the hands of the cashier inputting the prices on the till. We then see the figures, the ringing up of the numbers on the screen of the till. We see a similar process at the petrol station; we focus on the numbers going up as the tank is filled.

Later, we see the mother buying special food from a deli and the father buying DIY tools. Though these activities are not unusual in themselves, the scenes that follow present the film’s bleak ending: the family’s suicide. The food is for their final meal; the tools are not for repairing the home, but its destruction. But these actions do not stand in simple contrast to the making and doing family that we have been shown so far in the film.

The film’s soundtrack consists predominantly of diegetic sound, which focuses our attention even more closely on what is happening, not why. When the family eat, for example, their consumption of the food is given greater emphasis by the sounds of their eating and drinking. We are made to hear the chewing and swallowing. When we see the systematic destruction of the contents of the family home, we are made to hear the smashing, tearing, and cutting of these contents. The few instances when non-diegetic sound is used are strikingly discordant with what is depicted, and

further underscore the force of the devices specified. We hear the “suicide note,” written by the father to his parents, read out by him in voice-over; it is measured, reasonable, and delivered in a near-monotone voice. When music is used it jars, because it is too loud or emotionally at odds with what is depicted (e.g. a loud pop song on the radio during an awkward and emotional family moment; *The Power of Love* playing on MTV as the lethal drugs take effect).

In what is heard and what is seen, nothing is made a spectacle of, or exhibited: no musical cues indicate the mood of a scene or its significance; there is little explicit and thereby explanatory dialogue; there is little use of the characters’ facial expressions to hint at an underlying psychology. The viewer is denied these familiar cues. (Even when faces are shown, they do not offer ordinary interpretive access, as nearly everything is said and done in a monotone, almost expressionless, way.)³³ What is seen and heard resists a symbolic, psychological, or cultural reading. From this restraint, the film derives its force. In what we are shown and made to hear, Haneke seems to be “confining [our senses], leaving room for thought.”³⁴ We are accustomed to seeing films that use devices that theatricalize what is shown, that take over “the task of exhibition.”³⁵ In its restraint, however, *The Seventh Continent* fulfils the capacity “to reveal only and all of what is revealed to it.”³⁶ Its force derives from its refusal of the task of exhibiting the world. We are led to focus on the doings and the audible features of those doings, not on what we (ought to) feel about them. Life is presented almost naked, those mundane doings and sayings “[drawing] attention to themselves according to their natural weight.”³⁷

Breaking into film or breaking into one’s self

In our account of the film, we differ from a psychological, cultural, or symbolic reading of it. The film’s ending, and its focus on the repetitive lives of its characters, leads many in film studies to read it in such terms, as with Haneke’s films more generally. His films often depict comfortable, middle-class families and, in cultural terms, are often read as depicting the individualism, alienation, and lack of connection assumed to be characteristic of Western capitalist society.³⁸ This desire to “see through” films, to what they “really” say (about us) is also evident in critical-pedagogical approaches to film in general, such as that of Henry Giroux. There, film enables students to see how particular narratives and power relations are constructed and their own involvement in these. The critical-pedagogical dimension lies in “breaking into film” in order to reveal the power relations it portrays and instantiates, hence allowing students to engage in cultural critique, to see the shortcomings of contemporary society reflected back to them.³⁹

Understanding film's critical-educational potential along these lines has been questioned from within educational philosophy. For Pieter-Jan Decoster and Nancy Vansielegem, for example, film's educational dimension lies not in our (leading students to a) breaking into film, but rather in its capacity to break in to, disrupt us, "to disarm subjectivity."⁴⁰ Following Deleuze, they argue that cinema "can bring us into the right conditions ... to experience (an aspect of) the world, in which we are released from identities and structures in favour of a movement in thought."⁴¹ For film to be understood as educational in this sense implies that it "involves a loss of identity through movement in thought."⁴²

This orientation to the educational import of film is further articulated in Jan Masschelein's account of the film *Le Fils*.⁴³ His elaboration of film's potential to show and invite a movement of thought describes not a loss as such, but a suspension. Drawing on Arendt, he articulates this as learning to move in the gap "between past and future," requiring an attentiveness to the present that consists in deflecting the forces of past and future, the historical, biographical narratives according to which meaning is commonly derived. To learn to move in this gap we must "insert ourselves [in it] and thus also expose ourselves to what is happening."⁴⁴ In particular, the suspension actualized through *Le Fils* allows us to ask, Masschelein argues, how words "could begin to mean something new."⁴⁵

In distancing ourselves from a psychological or cultural reading of *The Seventh Continent* that, supposedly, breaks through to the *real* message of, and unveils what lies behind, what is depicted, and in locating the transformative potential of film instead in the force of its devices, we concur with positions such as Decoster and Vansielegem's and Masschelein's. To interpret the film in terms of what its ending implies psychologically imposes a reading that glosses over what is actually seen and heard, and effects an assimilation to our existing expectations and subject positions. Our attention to where, on our view, *The Seventh Continent* derives its force, shows that this film can interrupt the viewer's subjectivity (personal meanings, interpretations) and initiate thinking anew about the meaning of certain words – e.g. What does it mean to be a family? To raise children into a common world? etc. – as Masschelein says, "not in general, but in the concrete (and sometimes extreme) situations and conditions that society presents today."⁴⁶

Subjectivity: suspension and invitation

Alongside the argument on suspension, however, Masschelein further claims that, in the films he discusses, "there is a truth that shows itself," that the "camera registers the truth of the words and deeds of the protagonists,"⁴⁷ that these films "tell a truth in such a way that it becomes difficult *not to*

be concerned."⁴⁸ Drawing on Deleuze, he argues that "if the world has turned into a bad movie, an inflation of images, clichés, and simulacra, 'authentic' cinema could make us believe in the world again."⁴⁹ We find a similar ontological position on film in Decoster and Vansieleghem's analysis when they argue that the photographic image can penetrate "into reality instead of maintaining a distance from reality like the painter does."⁵⁰ But, following Cavell, this overstates the possibilities of film as a medium capable of establishing presentness to the world. The difference in positions pertains to how the automatism of the photographic nature of film is understood. In Decoster and Vansieleghem and Masschelein, a photograph, as "not hand-made but manufactured,"⁵¹ is taken as overcoming the disconnection to the world. Whereas Cavell takes the automatism of the photographic nature of film as affirming the very problem of (connecting to) reality, in positions such as Decoster and Vansieleghem's and Masschelein's, this seems to be taken as a solution to that problem, and, by extension, as a possible solution to our immunization from the world (and its pressing problems).

This has implications for how we conceive the position of the one viewing the film and that viewer's subjectivity with regard to (the possibility of) educational transformation. In Cavell's account, the work required of the self is nothing as dramatic or overwhelming as is implied by a loss of self or a suspension of the forces acting on the self. What is needed is as small and seemingly insignificant an act as trying to mean what we say – something Cavell refers to as the emphasis Wittgenstein puts "upon the absoluteness of my responsibility for the meaning I attach to my words."⁵² Clearly, language is public. But "my saying of [the words] makes their meaning private,"⁵³ and it is this appropriation of meaning that we are called upon to take responsibility for. That film can be an invitation for thinking is now generally accepted. But, following Cavell, we want to put this as an invitation to learn "to be unafraid of [one's] language."⁵⁴ In this sense, film is, as also suggested by Rothman and Keane,⁵⁵ an invitation to intelligibility. This requires not an emptying out of the self, but an enactment of a self that is simultaneously bound to communal uses of the words and convicted to take responsibility for whatever meaning is intended when saying them.

In relation to our experience of viewing *The Seventh Continent*, this means that the devices discussed above do not "work" by themselves, as if autonomously compelling. In Cavell's understanding, a transition to a next self is set in motion as a response to a question posed by someone or something. This implies that work also needs to be *done*, by the one viewing the film, understood minimally as a receptivity. This is an *act* of the subject, a putting to work *of* one's subjectivity. The cultural reading of the film needs to be resisted *intentionally* in order for the routine-like character of the practices to strike the viewer as so blatantly prominent or "there." The viewer should be willing to *not* ask himself continuously "why" they are doing this or that, but be satisfied

with being restrained by what is shown and made audible. Suspension of explanations and of one's urge to explain, and the workings of the devices go together. This is to say that the film's force is not given, but is manifested in the very articulation of its invitation.

Conclusion

As we said, the use of *The Seventh Continent* in the postgraduate seminar was not intended to teach; no learning outcomes were attached to the viewing. So, what do we intend of our discussion of the film here? We have been able to articulate the force of *The Seventh Continent* due not only to our interest in this type of film, but also our existential given of being parents ourselves, of being spouses ourselves, of executing the very doings shown ourselves. But are there more general implications here?

In line with new experimental modes of inquiry, the use of film in the seminar is educational in its simply showing something of the world, without accompanying explanation, and in the acceptance that, as educators, we cannot but relinquish responsibility for whether and what transformation of subjectivities might occur. As educators, as academics, as parents, however, we can and we do still take responsibility for what we *show*, for what we draw attention to, what we point to in the world. Thus, the selection of such a film for the seminar is not driven by an *a priori* intention to be transformative for those viewing it, but by taking seriously the responsibility of pointing to something, as a pedagogical gesture. To refer to *The Seventh Continent* as an instance of the serious use of its devices, to paraphrase Cavell, is to say that it takes seriously the use of specific devices in their potential to point to something. The devices we have drawn attention to might be likened to pointing to what is worth attending to, achieved in the presentation of mundane practices of family that allows them to draw attention to themselves "according to their natural weight."

¹ Jan Masschelein, "Inciting an Attentive Experimental Ethos and Creating a Laboratory Setting: Philosophy of Education and the Transformation of Educational Institutions," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 58, no. 3 (2012): 354-370; Pieter-Jan Decoster and Nancy Vansieleghem, "Cinema Education as an Exercise in 'Thinking Through Not-Thinking'," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 7 (2014): 792-804; Alexis Gibbs, "'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Meaning," Paper presented at the annual PESGB Gregynog conference, July 2015.

² Michael Haneke, *Der Siebente Kontinent* (1989); <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098327/>.

³ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 125.

⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁵ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁶ Paul Jenner, "Response to Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed*," *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 1, no. 1 (2015): 19-26, 24.

⁷ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 22.

⁸ William Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A philosophical perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 64.

⁹ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 150.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

²² *Ibid.*, 132.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁸ *Ibid.*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

³¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 131ff.

³² Our attention to the use of diegetic sounds was drawn by Elsie Walker (see endnote 38).

³³ Cf. Todd Konrad, who stresses that "the viewer is denied opportunity to acquaint themselves with these people outside of *what they do*." Todd Konrad, "The Seventh Continent",

http://independentfilmquarterly.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=365&Itemid=115

(emphasis added).

³⁴ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁸ E.g. David Grossvogel, "The Coercion of Vision," *Film Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2007): 36-43; Elsie Walker, "Hearing the Silences (as well as the Music) in Michael Haneke's Films," *Music and the Moving Image* 3, no. 3

(2010): 15-30; Christopher Sharrett, "The Seventh Continent," *Senses of Cinema* 34 (2005), http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/cteq/seventh_continent/.

³⁹ See e.g. Henry Giroux, "Breaking into the Movies: Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Film," *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 6 (2011): 686-695.

⁴⁰ Decoster and Vansieleghem, "Cinema Education," 802.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 801.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, *Le Fils* (2002), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0291172/>.

⁴⁴ Masschelein, "Inciting an Attentive Experimental Ethos," 356.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 366.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁵⁰ Decoster and Vansieleghem, "Cinema Education," 798.

⁵¹ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 20.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Stanley Cavell, "Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan," in *Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell*, ed. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2005), 201.

⁵⁵ Rothman and Keane, *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed*.