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# Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others: Heideggerian ontology in Michael Haneke's *Vergletscherung-trilogie*

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## Abstract

In this paper I explore certain existential elements found in the work of Austrian director Michael Haneke by coupling Haneke's first three films, his *Vergletscherung-trilogie* (comprising *Der Siebente Kontinent*, *Benny's Video* and *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*), with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, focussing specifically on his delineation of *Dasein* (Being). This analysis is configured around two elements of Heidegger's philosophy of Being – Being as Being-in-the-world, and Being as Being-with-others. These delineations of Being are further analysed on three fronts. The first examines the role of the postmodern *milieu* in which Haneke's work is situated, a world of hyper-technology and rampant consumerism. The second and third fronts of analysis elucidate two delineations of space (Being-in-the-world), and people (Being-with-others). The discussion thus centres on the way in which Heidegger's ontology of Being is found in Haneke's sketching of the public space and of greater society. The paper concludes with an analysis of Haneke's treatment of the private space and the family unit.

Key terms: Michael Haneke; Martin Heidegger; *Vergletscherung-trilogie*; Being-in-the-world; Being-with-others, *Dasein*.

## Introduction

Hot on the heels of his growing international success, the scholarship surrounding the *oeuvre* of Austrian auteur Michael Haneke has increased in the last few years. Yet there are important gaps in this discourse, most notably in the way the existential components of Haneke's work, a very important philosophical underpinning which can be found across his *oeuvre*, are seldom commented upon. In this paper I explore some of these existential elements by coupling Haneke's first three films, his *Vergletscherung-trilogie* (comprising *Der Siebente Kontinent*,<sup>1</sup> *Benny's Video*<sup>2</sup> and *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*<sup>3</sup>), with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, focussing specifically on his delineation of *Dasein* (Being). This analysis is configured around two elements of Heidegger's philosophy of Being – Being as Being-in-the-world, and Being as Being-with-others. These delineations of Being are further analysed on three fronts. The first examines the role of the postmodern *milieu* in which Haneke's work is situated, a world of hyper-technology and rampant consumerism. The second and third fronts of analysis elucidate two delineations of space (Being-in-the-world), and people (Being-with-others). The discussion thus centres on the way in which Heidegger's ontology of Being is found in Haneke's sketching of the public space and of greater society. The paper concludes with an analysis of Haneke's treatment of the private space, and the family unit.

## Philosophical framework: Heideggerian ontology

Heidegger starts his existential enquiry into the nature of Being by firstly positing the question of what it means to be, to exist, which in turn introduces his second question, what it means to be the type of being that can ask such a question, thus introducing the concept of *Dasein*. Since it does not originate from some primary original essence (like a Creator, or God), *Dasein* itself has no determinate essence. Instead, it has the freedom to make itself and awaken the individual to his Being, as Otto Pöggeler (1994:41) argues, 'as potentiality-for-Being or understanding, *Dasein* is "primarily a Being-possible"'. This means that *Dasein* is always in the process of moving towards an understanding of its Being, in Heidegger's (1962 [1927]:287) terms, akin to the way a 'fruit brings itself to ripeness'. It is this characteristic of *Dasein* that illustrates the fact that the word means both being *here*, and being *there* – not only does *Dasein* reflect the current state of its Being, but it also always already has within itself the possibilities of its future development.

Central to Heidegger's understanding of *Dasein* is the fact that it is, in Pöggeler's (1969:68) words, 'situationally bounded', existing within the parameters of a world. Or, in Heidegger's terms, Being is always already Being-in-the-world. Jill Hargis (2007:56) explains this by suggesting that Heidegger works with 'a phenomenology that grounded human existence fully within its temporal and physical world'. Thus *Dasein* has at once both the freedom to make itself, of having no determinate essence, but is still constrained by the circumstances it finds itself in, by its world. This world is one over which the individual has little, or no control over, as SJ McGrath (2008:65) reiterates: 'Dasein finds itself "thrown" (*geworfen*) – in the midst of other *Dasein* and "innerworldly things" that it does not create

or control – into moods, horizons of interpretations, and historical discourses that began prior to its arrival and will continue after it is gone'. *Dasein* thus finds itself always already implicated within a particular set of temporal, historical and linguistic relations, to which the individual orientates himself by initiating a relationship with the world that is based on care. Heidegger's use of *care* comprises three interrelated forms. Care firstly speaks of the possibilities afforded to *Dasein*, its lack of determinate essence, and secondly of the ways in which its situatedness in the world limits these possibilities. Thirdly, it speaks of the inauthenticity that can creep into the individual's *Dasein* if he falls prey to the 'fallenness among fascinating world possibilities and idle curiosities, to the neglect of its own deepest possibility to be itself' (Caputo 1999:227).

Heidegger's use of the concept *world* here denotes the historic set of circumstances without which *Dasein* could not exist, and always already implies the concept of a shared existence, Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* as *Mitsein*. At its core, the concept of *Mitsein* negates the idea of the individual existing as an independent entity configuring its own Being. Its existence is dependent on the intersubjective nature of the relationships within which he is always already intertwined (Tuttle 2005 [1996]:66). Heidegger (1962 [1927]:155) asserts this by stating that 'the world of Dasein is a with-world [Mitwelt]. Being-in is Being-with-Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is Dasein-with [MitDasein]'. It is a world the individual does not occupy on his or her own, but needs to share with others.

Heidegger's delineation of Being-with-others as an element that prefigures the individual's existence in the world is strongly linked to the notion of an inauthentic *Dasein*. As explained previously, whereas an authentic *Dasein* accepts and embraces his/her finitude, an inauthentic *Dasein* denies it, or flees from it. It is this

inauthentic case of *Dasein* that Heidegger connotes with the concept of *Das Man*, or the They. Heidegger (1962 [1927]:154) defines *Das Man* by suggesting that 'by "Others" we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the "I" stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself – those among whom one is too'. By Being-in-the-world and sharing that world with others, the individual is slowly immersed in the machinations of *Das Man*, to such an extent that Heidegger (1962 [1927]:164) argues that 'this Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own *Dasein* completely into the kind of Being of "the Others", in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the "they" is unfolded'.

The indeterminate nature of *Dasein* entails that the individual needs to embrace the freedom of his existence. This means embracing the notion of death, as Heidegger (1962 [1927]:284) attests, 'in dying, it is shown that mineness and existence are ontologically constitutive for death. Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially'. An awareness of one's being-towards-death is thus the most salient marker of an authentic *Dasein*. Heidegger's notions of authenticity and inauthenticity are key here, and within this analysis I contend that the existential elements in Haneke's films are largely concerned with this tension.

## Thrownness: postmodernity and its discontents

It could be argued that throughout his *oeuvre*, Michael Haneke offers the viewer a scathing critique of postmodern western culture, employing the tension of

Heideggerian authenticity/inauthenticity to deliver this critique.<sup>4</sup> The viewer is consistently confronted with characters that seem to be thrown into a world lodged between the modernist dregs of technological progress and postmodernity's disillusioned consumption. Within the context of this analysis, I draw from Rutsky's (1999:4, 15-16) definition of the postmodern as a shift from the modern in its 'conception of technology', where he frames postmodernity as comprising 'high technology'. As Rutsky (1999:4) explains,

High technology is simulacral technology: a technology 'of reproduction rather than of production,' as Fredric Jameson has said of late-capitalist or postmodern technologies. What this technology reproduces – and thus puts 'into play' – is representation itself, style itself. But then, representation and style have always been technological, supplementary, simulacral. In high tech, however, this simulacral status becomes an end in itself, rather than merely a means to an end of a copy of an original.

This fits in well with Haneke's own experience of postmodernity, as Brian Price and John David Rhodes (2010:3) argue, 'Haneke's work might seem to affirm that Jean Baudrillard was right all along: the image has replaced the territory in the screen of our consciousness and has done so in the service of further violence'. The pessimism with which Haneke portrays this technologically advanced society of late capitalism<sup>5</sup> is most adamant in the *Vergleitscherung-trilogie*,<sup>6</sup> a stocktaking of how postmodernity has changed mankind's Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others. This stocktaking reveals Haneke's perception of post(modernity) as engendering a society cold and clinical in its ambition and hierarchical structuring. These postmodernist rules of engagement, Haneke's films seem to say, have brought about a wasteland of emotional and spiritual bankruptcy. Using an art form both highly technologically and capitalistically charged to deliver this critique,

Maximilian Le Cain (2003:9) has remarked that 'Haneke's films ... diagnose the latest often technology-inflected forms of spiritual and emotional paralysis that are frequently ignored or treated only indirectly ... by the cinema'. This diagnosis is made by placing his characters in relief to their thrown environment.

We are thrown, Heidegger suggests, into 'circumstances to which we must orient our existence' (Tuttle 2005 [1996]:58). In the case of Haneke's characters, this takes on a number of forms. The late capitalist character of the thrown world is postulated throughout the trilogy by the characters' constant iteration of how hard they have worked for their positions and their lifestyles. It is also hinted at through Haneke's focus on the spaces clearly signifying capitalist rhetoric, such as the corporation Georg works for in *Der Siebente Kontinent*, or the bank in *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*. Haneke's not-so-subtle criticism of this system is also espoused throughout, but perhaps nowhere as explicitly as in the destruction of the household goods and money in *Der Siebente Kontinent*. All three of the *Vergletscherung-trilogie* films take place in cities,<sup>8</sup> industrial landscapes of city lights, highways and supermarkets. They reflect a monotonous existence in a world characterised by an ever-increasing proliferation of objects – rows and rows of packaged foods in supermarkets, houses full of furniture and appliances, highways full of cars that all look the same. The uniformity of the landscape is mirrored in the uniformity of the emotional and spiritual dispositions of the characters of these three films. The family in *Der Siebente Kontinent* is plagued by the same sense of meaninglessness as is Benny and his family in *Benny's Video*, and this becomes the common refrain in the lives of all the characters of *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*, who find themselves in a world they did not create and have little control over, but which has largely shaped their

Being. There is a sense of emotional numbing that pervades these narratives and their characters, modernity's obsession with progress now relegated to a postmodern life devoted to objects.

Gautam Basu Thakur (2007:151) expounds this notion of a postmodern life devoted to objects by stating that 'Haneke's critique of consumerism is precisely a critique of this subjective destitution within a fantastical mechanised culture that promises an "end of dissatisfaction" but destroys our ability to think or feel without being prompted by consumer products'. This notion of a mechanised culture is one of the important themes that Heidegger remarks on in *Being and time* (1927) remarks upon. Heidegger is especially concerned with the technological changes that had marked modernity, and the influence this would have on the individual's ability to discern between authentic and inauthentic *Dasein*. This is compounded by Heidegger's negation of the view of technology as a neutral element, instead arguing that the way in which technology is used by mankind has very specific consequences (Heidegger 1962 [1927]:287).

In *The question concerning technology* (1954), Heidegger extends this critique, articulating two terms that are central to the discourse of technology – *technē* and *physis*. Within Heidegger's delineation, *physis* is that which evolves naturally, which carries within itself the seed of its own evolution. *Technē*, in contrast, born out of human interference, is artificially constructed. McGrath (2008:70) elucidates the tension between these two terms by explaining that, according to Heidegger,

a culture whose *technē* is in dialogue with *physis* ... does not control or dominate the presence of beings, but waits for the event of their emergence. Modern *technē*, by contrast,

makes everything available all the time ... nothing comes to be or disappears on its own because we have reduced everything to something that is constantly available.

Within this framework, Heidegger's disillusionment with modernity becomes clear. It also bears interesting links with Haneke's dissatisfaction with the mechanised culture of postmodernity, which the director depicts as an endless conveyor belt of consumer products and existential *angst*. Spanning from modernity to postmodernity, both Heidegger and Haneke seem to question the ways in which technology has negatively affected the Being of humankind.

Another element of Heidegger's (1954:sp) sketching of technology that is relevant to the study of Haneke's work, particularly within the context of the *Vergletscherung-trilogie*, is that of *Gestell*, or Enframing. Continuing from the premise that technology is never neutral, Heidegger highlights the fact that the technology used by humankind directly affects their way of seeing the world, and consequently their Being-in-the-world. Technology therefore frames humankind's perspective on reality, and thus wields an immense amount of power. Within Haneke's work this power becomes tangible, for instance in Benny's inability to distinguish between technological representation and the real in *Benny's Video*, ending in the death of a stranger, or the way in which the industrialised nature of the lifeworld of Anna and Georg in *Der Siebente Kontinent* affects them to such an extent that they find it necessary to kill themselves. Added to this is Haneke's use, throughout the trilogy, of television sets, highways, and cameras as objects of *Gestell* that play a very real role in the oscillation of *Dasein*, how it swings back and forth between the poles of authenticity and inauthenticity. Considering Heidegger's sentiment, McGrath (2008:76) elucidates this by stating that 'we do not feel at

home in the technological world we have made for ourselves ... and we have lost our trusted guides'. It is within this world of a technologically-induced homelessness that Haneke's work can be situated.

## The commodified existence of the public space, and post-modern society as *Das Man*

In the *Vergletscherung-trilogie*, Haneke's Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others is reflected in the characters' engagement with two types of spaces, public and private,<sup>9</sup> and two types of 'Others' – the masses, and the more intimate relations within the family. When discussing Haneke's depiction of Being-in-the-world it should be noted that a number of theorists (including Frey 2003:3) have remarked upon the fact that Haneke's public spaces are what Marc Augé (1995) terms non-places: supermarkets, highways, airport terminals, postmodern spaces in which no organic personal growth or interpersonal communication is possible. This is indeed the case with many of the primary spaces in which the characters function classified as non-places – the supermarket, bank and car wash in *Der Siebente Kontinent*, Benny's favourite video store and the McDonald's in *Benny's Video*, as well as the subway that houses the Romanian boy or the bank in which all the characters of the film finally die in *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*. These spaces are all characterised by the unequivocal way in which Haneke renders the city, and these non-places in particular, as sterile and cold places of isolation and alienation. In formalistic terms this is achieved by Haneke's use of stark, white interiors, harsh lighting, and awkward framing, and his almost ritualistic reiteration of certain soulless images of the city, of endless highways that do not seem to go anywhere, of anonymous apartment blocks and office

buildings, of rows and rows of consumer products wrapped in endless layers of plastic, mirroring the disconnected emotional dispositions of those walking the aisles.

Heidegger's notion of Being-in-the-world is partly founded on the idea of the individual's *Dasein* being formed by the world into which he is thrown. The intrinsic isolation and alienation of the world of Haneke (and Heidegger) is reflected in the way in which the public space,<sup>10</sup> which conjures up thoughts of community and connection, functions as anything but that.<sup>11</sup> The world outside Benny's bedroom window only reveals highways<sup>12</sup> full of cars that all look the same, transporting people he does not know. This is also seen in the *mise-en-scène* of Haneke's frames, as Monica Filimon (2010:245) argues, 'fragmentation, isolation, and strict geometrical grids govern both the public and private diegetic spaces of the film'. The degree of indifference in Haneke's public spaces is so extreme it often verges on cruelty. The way in which the Romanian boy in *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* appropriates the subway as his new home is perhaps the most salient example in this regard, but others abound, like Evi's school or the car wash in *Der Siebente Kontinent*. The public spaces are where the characters interact with those that make their Being-in-the-world possible, yet the interaction remains superficial. There is no true *Mitsein*, no interaction between individuals that attests to the way Being-with creates the space in which human-kind functions. When Anna is in the supermarket in *Der Siebente Kontinent*, she notices only the till and the goods which are being purchased, not once looking at the face of the cashier; the face of the video shop attendant in *Benny's Video* is similarly never seen, only the videos and money that are exchanged.

Other elements that mark the individual's Being-with-others can also be traced throughout the trilogy. It remains a very formal engagement, cold, uncomfortable, and often competitive. In this way Georg's encounter with his former boss in *Der Siebente Kontinent* becomes symptomatic of the way in which Being-with functions in the following two films that comprise the trilogy – the lack of any real interest in the others that are encountered, and an unwillingness to bridge that divide. This is also reflected in the lack of sex found in Haneke's narratives, a lack so pronounced that it warrants comment.<sup>13</sup> The sex that takes place within marriages is discussed later in this paper, but it is very interesting that within a large part of Haneke's *oeuvre*, almost no sex takes place outside the marital structure.<sup>14</sup> There seems to be a complete lack of any sexual engagement (of any kind, including sexually charged flirtation) between strangers in Haneke's first three films, an unexpected element within contemporary, post-religious westernised society. In this way, it seems positively absurd that no sexual overture ever occurs between Benny and the girl he brings home. The viewer's expectation of some form of sexual contact (understandably, given the context of two pubescent teenagers alone at home) is consistently thwarted, and when the climax of the scene does finally occur it only recalls the violent nature of the sexual act, none of the intimacy or excitement.

In some cases, Haneke's rendering of Being-with mirrors the cruelty found in the public space, an element the director has commented upon: 'I ... believe that we live in a permanent state of civil war ... the war of carelessness and unkindness, which is something all of us participate in day in day out. The daily wounds from this civil war are perhaps the real reasons behind the so-called "real" wars' (cited in Grabner 2010:14). An early instance of this is found in *Der Siebente Kontinent*, where the story told by the old woman in

Anna's ophthalmology practice beautifully illustrates such cruelty;<sup>15</sup> in later instances, this cruelty reaches violent and harrowing heights, as when Benny shoots the unknown girl, eventually killing her, in *Benny's Video*. Haneke's public spaces, shot in dim, muted colours, emphasise the individual's loneliness and despair, stark depictions of individuals getting lost in the uniformity of both the millions of objects-to-hand (cameras, televisions, plastic McDonald's trays, records, books, clothing – the list goes on) that make up their world, and *Das Man*.

*Das Man* takes up a central position within the *Ver-gletscherung-trilogie*. Howard Tuttle (2005 [1996]:66) notes that "'being-with" indicates that *Dasein* exists to others in a publicly encounterable world of common meanings, languages, practices, and manipulations'. Pöggeler (1994:43) defines *Das Man* by explaining that '*Dasein* understands itself and Being in general in terms of the beings which can be encountered. *Dasein* does not live at all as itself, but rather as "one lives"; life "is lived" by means of the "dictatorship" of ... *Das Man*'. Within Haneke's oeuvre, *Das Man* is framed within the parameters of the *bourgeoisie*, the privileged culture class. In fact, it is quite interesting to note that across almost all of Haneke's oeuvre the viewer finds narratives largely consisting of upper-middle class European subjects. Theorists like Christopher Sharrett (2010:212) have argued that Haneke's films express 'the irrelevance of high culture to the current world', high culture's inability to provide guidance or even comfort in the light of emotional dislocation or physical displacement, or social ills such as war or poverty. As *Das Man* distracts the individual from an authentic *Dasein* by its negation of death, linking the notion of *Das Man* to a particular class allows Haneke to frame this distraction in the form of the mechanisms of capitalist western society. In *Der Siebente Kontinent*, Anna and Georg's realisation

of their subservience to *Das Man* comes in the form of the monotony of the everyday routine that keeps the system in check. Haneke spends the first half of the film chronicling, in minute detail, the routine of their days and years, of waking, eating, working, sleeping, the camera focusing on the objects that form part of these routines (beds, coffee machines, cars, pencils), but which are also only in the possession of the characters because the routine makes it possible for them to buy these things. The same pattern is found in both *Benny's Video* and *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*, where the characters seem to be consumed with the concerns of an everyday existence; conversations such as Benny's parents discussing the benefits of a pyramid scheme, or Maximilian calling home to tell his parents about exams he will be writing, abound. There seems to be little reference to any greater existential framework of life, and yet the notion of death permeates the frames through Haneke's incessant long takes, which force the viewer to look beyond *Das Man*'s distractions and become aware of the impending Being-towards-death that anxiously tugs away at his characters, niggling them toward authentic *Dasein*.

It could be argued that *Das Man* is represented so veraciously in Haneke's films precisely because of his lack of characterisation and typification, an element a few theorists have commented upon. Scott Loren and Jörg Metelman (2010:207) contend that 'another irritating strategy of Haneke's early films was his strict dramaturgic refusal to grant his figures a consistent and plausible psychological basis for their actions', yet I would argue a different case. Instead of being irritating, this choice enables Haneke to illustrate the numbing evening-out of *Das Man*'s influence, of producing types instead of personalities. This is of course also seen in the fact that most of Haneke's characters have variations of the same name – Anne/

Anna, Georg/Georges, Eva/Evi. This approach makes sense within both Haneke's greater ontological framework and his obvious discomfort with the postmodern project.

This discomfort with the postmodern project is also seen in Haneke's consistent focus on how reality has been mediated. It could perhaps even be suggested that the way in which the media mediates reality in Haneke's films becomes a second mechanism in which *Das Man* distracts the individual from his Being-towards-death. Many theorists have commented on the role of television news in Haneke's *oeuvre*, with a television on in the background, unwatched, in most of his scenes. The realities the world faces, and the existential wake-up call this could represent to the individual, is consistently diluted by rendering it into a secondary narrative, by removing it from the lifeworld of the individual through casting it within the realm of that which is virtual, and therefore cannot permeate his or her existential parameters.<sup>16</sup> Oliver Speck (2010:83) remarks that 'as soon as something real is represented, it is reproduced in another format. The atrocities that take place in another country are immediately mediated', which also casts allusions to Rutzky's (1999:4) framing of the postmodern as encompassing 'simulacral technology', of a process where real life events are stripped from their traumatic content, rendering them as entertainment. In *Benny's Video* this mediation is taken a step further, with not only the incessant presence of television news permeating the film, but also Benny's own mediation of reality via his camera.<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that most of the key scenes in the film are presented to the viewer through the double-bind of two frames – Benny's frame within Haneke's frame. In what are perhaps the two most prominent scenes, the one of the killing of the pig, and the scene where the girl is killed, the events are presented in this way. When Benny's parents learn of

the killing they are similarly shown the video of the event, a technique which is mirrored towards the end of the film when Benny shows the police the video of his parents discussing how to get rid of the girl's body. This constant deferring of reality, and ultimately of death, thus functions as a very prominent way in which technology aids *Das Man* in its distraction.

## The private space as cocoon of death, and the family

Haneke's characters are not only faced with a public space that speaks of indifference and dislocation, but the director elaborates on this alienated Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others by juxtaposing the public space with the private. Just as Haneke's public space elides the traditional notions of community and connection that a public space connotes, his private space, the home, becomes an inverse form of the warmth and life that the idea of home conjures up. The home of Georg and Anna, of Benny and his family, and of the various individuals whose narratives make up *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*, all emphasise the alienation, isolation and despair the individuals living within them experience. Drawing from the work of Brigitte Peucker, Speck (2010:132) has rightly observed that this is mirrored in the formalist characteristics of the film: 'Looking at the dysfunctional families in the glaciation-trilogy... form and content mirror each other, i.e., that the characters' attempts to cope with their fragmented lives is itself narrated in a fragmented style'. The fact that any interaction between members of a family is often shot from a distance (a significant example being the dinner table scene with Anna's brother in *Der Siebente Kontinent*) not only distances the viewer from the characters, but also serves to underscore the complete disconnect that marks all relationships within the frame.

There is no comfort to be found in this Being-with-others which is of the most intimate kind.<sup>18</sup> In *Der Siebente Kontinent* this is played out in the utter silence of the film, with Georg, Anna and Evi barely speaking to one another, entire scenes (such as the scenes in the car wash) taking place without any words being spoken. Even when Anna tells Evi she loves her it is delivered in a cold, emotionless tone. This inability to communicate what is felt is echoed earlier in the film, when Anna's brother notes how their dead mother, before her death, said that she had always wished that people had screens instead of heads, so that you could easily read what they thought and felt. But it is not only language that is strained in the film; affection and sex are similarly stunted. There is very little physical affection between family members, with Anna not even hugging her brother, although knowing that she will never see him again. Georg and Anna's sex is brief, devoid of words or even kisses. The noticeable lack of sex in Haneke's films has been commented upon, but it is interesting to note that while Haneke depicts almost no sex between strangers, the sex that takes place within marriages, as is the case with Georg and Anna, seems to be as cold as the rest of the engagement between his characters. This is underscored by Stefanie Knauss (2010:219), suggesting that 'his negation of the conventional formal means of representing sex is intensified by his clinically aseptic *mise-en-scène*, the sheer contrary nature of the lush, sensual atmosphere of most soft-porn or erotic films'. In all of these instances of both sex and general affection, Haneke does not play a particularly subtle hand in illustrating the coldness and isolation that marks his characters' Being-in-the-world, with Evi's antics of feigned blindness, and the newspaper heading of 'Blind but not alone' which Anna finds later, being blatantly obvious.

*Benny's Video* has Haneke presenting a somewhat more subtle approach, but the isolation and lack of emotional currency within families is still a major theme. Benny's family is almost never at home, and when they are the communication between the family members always happens through an intermediate form of technology. Benny speaks to his father whilst in the bathroom, their eyes only meeting in the mirror, Benny having his back to his father, never turning around to face him directly. When Benny tells his parents of the incident with the girl there is a similar spatial positioning, all three of them standing with their backs to one another, looking at a screen on which the footage of the murder is playing. *This mise-en-scène* becomes the prevalent representational mode in the film, with characters rarely ever speaking directly to one another, making eye contact, but rather standing or sitting behind one another when speaking. This spatial disconnect is also seen in *Egypt* where Benny and his mother share a room, their beds right next to one another, but even in that intimate spatial relation they appear as strangers. But it is not only Benny's family who seem to have this disconnected relationship; the fact that the family of the girl who dies is completely absent from the narrative, apart from a mere mention, questions the very notions of safety and nurturing individuals supposedly have within a family. Being the title character this is perhaps most obvious in the case of Benny, who, the viewer realises, has no real relationship with any person in his life.

In *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*, the viewer is confronted with different domestic settings in which despair and dysfunction are the norm. Through the utilisation of long takes Haneke forces the viewer to confront the extreme level of dysfunction, of acute isolation, loneliness, and lack of communication and affection between family members. On a

very basic level the film, continuing the trend set by the first two parts of the trilogy, is marked by a lack of any facial expressions traditionally linked to happiness or friendliness, and instances in which characters smile are very rare. The stony expressions of characters are so prevalent it would almost become gimmicky, if it were not so clear to the viewer why this lack of positive bodily engagement exists. In fact, the film's narratives read as a list of ways not to live your life: The old man who spends his days indoors, alone, fighting with his daughter over the telephone, the couple with a new-born baby who never get any sleep and no longer have anything to say to one another, spending meal times trying to bridge the gap between them but failing every time,<sup>19</sup> the young Romanian boy who flees to Austria, leaving behind a home of poverty. But these narratives also offer scathing clues to how Haneke views the Being-with-others which the family offers. The scene between the elderly man and his daughter speaking over the phone, for instance, is one of Haneke's greatest cinematic feats. The isolation of the *mise-en-scène* is strengthened by the fact that the viewer is only privy to one side of the conversation. The man's conversational tone oscillates between being loving (or trying to be, at least), and being manipulative and vindictive. It could be argued that this says almost as much about the extreme ambiguity inherent in these relationships as does the fact that he consistently stalls the ending of the phone call, again and again thinking of ways to keep his daughter on the line, despite the strained nature of the phone call. I would suggest that this scene is perhaps a summary of all the family relations found not only in the *Vergletscherung-trilogie*, but across Haneke's *oeuvre*. Again it should be mentioned that Haneke masterfully pairs this emotional wasteland with frames that are existentially bare – homes with stark interiors, cool, dark colours and stripped-down shots and cuts.

David Sorfa (2006:98) has remarked that Haneke's homes are the result of 'modern consumerism', bringing about 'an *unheimlich* unease in what should be perfectly happy families'.<sup>20</sup> This is reflected in the camera's pre-occupation with the objects in these houses, and not the people.<sup>21</sup> The most salient example of this is the first ten minutes of *Der Siebente Kontinent*, in which the camera records the daily routine of Georg, Anna and Evi without once showing their faces, instead focusing on the objects in the house. This again links back to the notion of class discussed earlier and the status of most of the characters in Haneke's *Vergletscherung-trilogie* (with the exception of some of the characters in *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*) as members of a privileged, *bourgeois* class. There is specific emphasis on the fact that the characters are financially comfortable, an element that is first mentioned in *Der Siebente Kontinent*, where Anna's letter recounts to her mother and father-in-law their stable and prosperous financial position, pointing out how hard they have worked for it. Whilst Anna reads the letter the camera positions Georg in the trappings of his work, a classic industrial setting connoting the cogs of capitalist westernised society, immediately establishing a link between this privileged class and its part in the capitalist machine. The way in which modern life has brought about a proliferation of user goods has in effect crowded out the interpersonal connections between the members of a family. Not only that, but it has also successfully insulated the family from the reality of the outside world. In Haneke's films this is seen through the omnipresence of the television screen and its broadcasting of world news. Blaring news of natural disasters, terrorist conflicts and individual crimes is a strain which runs throughout many of the scenes in all three of the *Vergletscherung-trilogie* films, and is indeed a hallmark of Haneke's *oeuvre*, where a television is usually on in the background, yet rarely watched. The characters

are constantly exposed to the reality of their Being-in-the-world and their Being-with-others, but the news of these events reaching them through the television set dilutes its impact, turning tragedy and disaster into mere white noise.

## Conclusion

The films that comprise the *Vergletscherung-trilogie*, it could be argued, are perhaps the films in which the director's *penchant* for existential themes is most blatant, and which this paper discusses in terms of Haneke's despairing sketch of Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others. These films are marked by their severely pessimistic rendering of the postmodern world and the life of the late capitalist consumer, which, I argue, is that into which his characters are, in a Heideggerian sense, *thrown*. Haneke explores this postmodern and late capitalist world by placing his characters in two types of spaces, public and private, and amidst two types of others, society, and the family. The commodified nature of the public space makes an authentic sense of *Dasein* impossible, as does the proximity of society, which takes on the stifling form of Heidegger's *Das Man*. Yet Haneke does not even provide a reprieve in the more intimate spaces of the home, amidst family. Instead, the viewer finds a Being-with which is still characterised by isolation and alienation. Within this context, Haneke traces the trajectory towards an authentic sense of *Dasein*, through elements of existential anxiety and the nothing, with some of his characters embracing their thrownness, their Being-towards-death. Others, like most of the characters in *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*, remain distracted by *Das Man's* idle talk over everyday concerns, never reaching authenticity.

Haneke's *Vergletscherung-trilogie* seems to set the tone for the rest of his *oeuvre*, a body of work beset with existential concerns that have not yet been adequately discussed in the scholarship concerning the director's films. It is within this context that the paper suggests that Martin Heidegger and Michael Haneke perhaps make strange but apt bedfellows, and that Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein*, and specifically his delineation of authentic and inauthentic instances of *Dasein*, provides an illuminating perspective from which to approach the various complexities of post-modern life that Haneke's work showcases. If, as McGrath (2008:76) contends, 'Heidegger believes himself called to prophetically announce the advent of this unimaginable new epoch that is beginning to unconceal itself, at least for the poets and thinkers', Haneke answers this call, constantly reminding the viewer of their Being-towards-death.

## Notes

- 1 *Der Siebente Kontinent (1989)*, starring Dieter Berner, Birgit Doll and Leni Tanzer, depicts an upper-middle class Austrian family who become discontented with their suburban, late-capitalist lifestyle, eventually systematically destroying their entire home, and then committing suicide.
- 2 *Benny's Video (1992)* stars Arno Frisch, Angela Winkler and Ulrich Mühe. The film introduces the viewer to the 14-year old Benny and his family, and to Benny's world of endless technological simulacrum, of a room full of cameras, televisions and computer screens. During the course of the narrative the dysfunctional communication between Benny and his other family members is explored, particularly within the context of him killing a

- girl he brings home one day from the video store with a bolt gun he stole from his family's farm.
- 3 *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* (1994) is the final instalment of the trilogy. The film showcases eight different parallel narratives that seem to have nothing in common with one another. Each narrative focuses on one or two characters of widely diverse genders, ages and socio-economic backgrounds, depicting the very mundane elements of their daily lives, until the point where all the characters die in a random shooting. The film stars Gabriel Cosmin Urdes, Lukas Miko, Otto Grünmandl, Anne Bennent, and Udo Samel.
  - 4 Of course, Heidegger himself had written extensively about technology within the context of modernity in *The question concerning technology*, a text which informs Rutzky's discussion of the postmodern and its relation to technology. That being said, although Heidegger's thoughts on modernism and how it becomes defined by technology will be incorporated into my discussion in a cursory manner, the current paper does not provide the space for exploring this in full.
  - 5 As drawn from Fredric Jameson's (2000:188) conception of the different stages of capitalism, and postmodernity's space within that of late capitalism.
  - 6 The trilogy was first dubbed as such after Haneke (2000:174) referred to the common theme of the emotional glaciation of society that underlies all three films.
  - 7 Speck (2010:131) argues against reading Haneke's characters as 'bankrupt consumers who have completely bought into capitalism', suggesting that it functions as 'an implied conservative message that weakens or even belies the critical import of Haneke's films'. Although I agree with Speck's general thesis of how Haneke's films certainly do not advocate a return-to a simpler, less technologically-driven time, I would suggest that Haneke pertinently chooses the tropes of capitalism and high culture and the class of the *bourgeoisie* because this is exactly his audience – upper-middle class, highly educated partakers of 'art cinema'.
  - 8 *Benny's Video* is the one exception of the trilogy where the viewer finds a quite prominent interplay between the spaces of the city and the country. The infamous opening scene of *Benny's Video* features the killing of a pig in the pastoral space of an Austrian farm, where the distinction between those living on the farm (and responsible for the killing of the pig) is made in relief to those very clearly not living on the farm (Benny's parents). They seem out of place, not quite sure what to do whilst the pig is about to be killed. Benny clearly does not share their interest in the farm, mentioning to the girl he brings home that 'it's so dead out there ... so boring'.
  - 9 Speck (2010:79) argues that the families in Haneke's films act 'in bad faith by erecting a bad immanence, a shutting out the outside world in the vain attempt to resurrect what has long been lost in postmodernity: the difference between public and private space'. I partly agree with Speck's notion, conceding that Haneke's treatment of space, and especially the interplay between the mass media and the private space, certainly does elide the formal dialectic of private and public space, but these distinctions do however still exist in Haneke's *oeuvre*. Although there are many similarities between Haneke's rendering of the public and private space, the spaces ultimately serve different

purposes within Haneke's greater ontological project. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, the public space/private space dichotomy is still relevant.

10 Public spaces such as parks, town squares, and sidewalks.

11 It should be noted that although Heidegger's formal categories of Being are universal and thus not intended to be bound to any historical epoch, but instead as ways in which the human condition and humankind's existential nature can be understood, Heidegger also often swerves from this initial course and writes about *Dasein* specifically within the context of modernity, the period Heidegger himself experienced. Heidegger's notion that '... every understanding of Being is shaped by some sense of time' (Caputo 1999:225) thus paradoxically also reflects back on his own time, to such an extent that a number of scholars, including Hargis (2007:54), have commented on Heidegger's tenuous relationship with modernity, as she writes, 'although Heidegger's *Das Man* was intended as an essential ontological category, it is so imbued with the conservative objections to the modern, industrial, urban masses that it operates more as a criticism of modern norms than as an ontological or timeless characteristic'. This tension in Haneke's conception of Being finds a worthy ontological partner in Haneke's own complex relationship with the postmodern.

12 Images of highways take up a central position in the taxonomy of Haneke's frames, an almost ritualistic metaphor the director consistently invokes. It could be argued that in Haneke's view the highway not only functions as the ultimate non-place, but is consequently also the public space that signifies most accurately the progress of postmodernity and the western world, seamlessly encapsulating

the modernist wet dream of speed, efficiency and technology.

13 As has been remarked upon by, among others, Knauss (2010:217).

14 The only instance where non-marital copulation does possibly take place is in *La Pianiste* (2001), at the drive-in. As the marital status of the couple is, however, not disclosed it is impossible to make a conclusive statement on the matter.

15 The old lady's story recounts an event that had occurred in her youth. She and her classmates had teased a friend about wearing glasses, and were in turn cursed by the bespectacled friend, told that one day they would all need glasses, too. The old lady then tells Anna that indeed within a few years of this happening the whole class was wearing glasses.

16 Meghan Sutherland (2010:184) makes a compelling case for this, which is worth quoting at length:

Reformulating the relation between media and being along these lines holds powerful implications for both philosophy and politics. First and foremost, the trope of visitation gives us a way of conceptualizing some of the more confounding ways in which visual media technologies transform the work of enframing by layering at least two hegemonic productions of order over one another: on one register, the 'imagined communities' that they connect as social formations and, on another, the particular representations of the world that immediately appear as characterizations of those formations. This process of layering – where the content of the television image serves as the unstable guarantor of its own technological form – is one of the most under-thought aspects of how the medium helps produce the world.

17 Benny is constantly filming the various spaces and events that comprise his lifeworld – his home, his family, and the trip he and his mother take to Egypt, to name but a few.

18 It could be argued that Haneke's typification of Being-with-others is not that far removed from Heidegger's own charting of this important element of Being. The way in which Heidegger consistently frames those one shares one's world with as being a part of *Das Man* immediately casts them in a negative light, and renders the relationship one might have with them as 'inauthentic'. This quite radically nihilist conceptualisation of humankind's relationship to his other(s) is thus, in Heideggerian terms, yet another way in which the world is rendered as a fundamentally hostile space.

19 This scene is perhaps one of the most powerful scenes in Haneke's *oeuvre*. The way in which Haneke manages to capture the absolute lack of companionship between the married couple paints a harsher portrait of the realities of the Being-with that is marriage than anywhere else in his later films.

20 Heidegger's own use of the word *unheimlich* can be denoted in various ways. One of these instances correlates closely to the way in which Haneke delineates the concepts of family and the home. Another of Heidegger's delineations of the *unheimlich* refers to the state that *Das Man* attempts to escape, from the nothing through an obsessive unauthentic domesticity (Heidegger 1962 [1927]:233).

21 In *Benny's Video* the objects in Benny's family home speak not only of modern consumerism, but also of the way in which Haneke couples this privileged class with high culture. The staggering number of paintings and art prints in the home is the best

example of this, emphasising not only their class, but consequently also their level of education.

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