

Episode 2 The End of Self or The World

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Is *The Seventh Continent* a movie? Or a new continent? Both. In Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke's film, we witness the planned disappearance of a family, a couple and their daughter who methodically erase themselves from their environment. The new continent located between Hawaii and California, on the other hand, produces a substance that is toxic for aquatic life, or actually for life in general. *One continent too many.*

In 1989, Austrian director and screenwriter Michael Haneke made a movie that caused a stir for him at home, but also made him known internationally: *The Seventh Continent*.

The film recounts the stifling story of a family that decides to remove itself from the living because it has lost all interest in what society has to offer. His approach is methodical, cold, banal and most of all, as some put it, "sickening".

Life is reified everywhere, in every meticulously crafted detail. All while avoiding the shortcut of using flashbacks, the narration describes "a day in these people's lives, then another one a year later, and so on, by juxtaposing everything." For three years, slowly but surely, a family makes it all disappear—abandoning work, destroying possessions until finally disappearing themselves. Child included. Who wouldn't be profoundly destabilized by the uncertainty of whether little Eva, the self-destructive couple's child, really understands what's going on?

Because they only see the outside world through their car windshield as water and soap stream down—they stay inside the car while at the carwash—, because the endless repetition of conventional gestures renders them breathless, because they must live through the unlivable, Eva, Anna and Georg tip over into a place beyond life's reach. Their suicides are an escape to an 'elsewhere' that seems straight out of an advertisement¹.

In *Haneke par Haneke*, a book of interviews with the director published in French in 2012 by Stock, the filmmaker says about the film's origins: "I was especially moved by an article about a family that decided to commit suicide but first destroyed everything they owned. The article offers all kinds of social and psychological explanations. But I was interested in the idea that before you destroy yourself, you first destroy the material universe that has annihilated you." The result is all the more striking because he so artfully avoids hyperbole. As Haneke says: "I wanted to avoid extremes, because they immediately stand out."

Here is how the director imagines the film. And since this is, after all, a subtraction chronicle, we had to leave out a few lines to respect our time limit.:

“Linz, 1987. A couple, Georg and Anna, and their little girl Eva. Clearly successful from a social and professional point of view.

Existential mechanisms increasingly take over these so-called living beings. Seeing a fatal car crash no longer elicits any emotional reaction, it only hatches an idea.

Georg asks Anna to cancel their newspaper subscription. He resigns from his job. She leaves her store to her brother. The couple withdraws all their money from the bank. Georg buys an axe, a hammer and an electric drill. Eva no longer has to go to school. Georg sells off the family car. He pulls out the telephone line. Anna cuts up their clothes. Eva destroys her books. Georg saws the furniture, breaks the aquarium, throws banknotes into the toilet. Eva ingests a drink prepared by her parents. Anna swallows some pills. Georg fills a syringe. The television stays on, but there is nothing to watch.”

An empty television screen with no program on. Easy to understand why the film’s final image strikes a nerve for *The Subtraction Chronicles*. Programs are usually interrupted when something is wrong.

In 2019, we know the “seventh continent” to be an island made of tons of plastic trash floating between Hawaii and California. For years now, this “seventh continent” has been observed to cover 16 times more surface area than predicted by the worst estimates. The plastic matter that constitutes this revolting continent is slowly dissipating, creating a “micro-plastic soup” that is extremely toxic for the sea life.

So first, the project of “subtracting oneself from a life, or more precisely a way of life with which we no longer feel in phase” (Haneke), and then a “surplus continent” of poison; the micro-plastic soup.

By comparing these two *Seventh Continents*, you get a new reading on Haneke’s film. The tragedy of it comes from concentrating so much potential on human negativity, without any opening to the outside. As we said, the drama plays out in closed spaces: at work, in the apartment, or in the car. The film is incredibly stifling. It was just at the cusp of the 1990s.

The extreme attention we bring to our surroundings today may have prevented this family’s choice to subtract itself: rather than withdrawing, perhaps it would have attempted to establish better living conditions.

The fact that, *today more than ever*, we can envision our world coming to a brutal end—a world of cars and electricity, of Fiber and Starbucks—offers a change in perspective. Haneke’s family sought escape a world they thought would endure. The current destruction of our world, the blatant signs of its extreme fragility, demands the contrary: that we try to write alternatives onto a page in danger of becoming blank much more quickly than we thought.

In his book *Ravage*, published in 1943 at the height of World War II, French novelist René Barjavel imagines life in June 2052: “Twenty-five million, that is the most recently-announced

statistic from the capital census. Over the past fifty years, cities have poured out past the round traces indicated on the maps from the 20th century. They are deformed, stretching along train lines, highways, and waterways. They bleed into one another, forming a single agglomeration, like lace, an immense lattice of factories, storehouses, worker's tenements, middle class homes, mushroom buildings." And he adds, "In the holes of this Lace City, the virgin forest is reborn."

THIS WAS: Risking a blank slate as subtraction.