

# Supermodernity, Capital, and Narcissus: The French Connection to Michael Haneke's *Benny's Video*

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## A Preview of Coming Attractions

Fade-in. From a dark corridor a shaky, grainy camera captures an open door to the outside. A pig is led out of the barn and the camcorder follows. Pan to a man standing nearby, pan back to the pig. A slaughtering gun held by two hands appears in the frame and is pressed to the pig's forehead. Zoom-in. The gun shoots; the pig falls to the ground, the camera closely following the pig's convulsing body. Pause. Rewind. Slow motion. Again the gun shoots, the pig falls to the ground, the camera closely following the pig's convulsing body. Stop. The screen flickers with snow and the title of Michael Haneke's 1992 feature appears in red: *Benny's Video*.

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The second installment in Haneke's "Vergletscherungs-Trilogie" begins with a scene that makes clear, in Haneke's words, "worum es geht":<sup>1</sup> "what it's about" is placing the spectator in the voyeuristic perspective to view ritually and fetishistically the slaughter of a pig on home video in a teenager's room with drawn shades and outfitted with every imaginable piece of video, TV, stereo, and surveillance equipment. The spectator soon realizes that the truly disturbing aspect of what a Swiss newspaper called "the most disgusting film of the year"<sup>2</sup> is not what's on the screen, but how what's on the screen is perceived and processed.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Karl Suppan, "Der wahre Horror liegt im Blick: Michael Hanekes Ästhetik der Gewalt," *Utopie und Fragment: Michael Hanekes Filmwerk* eds. Franz Grabner, Gerhard Larcher, Christian Wessely (Thaur: Kulturverlag, 1996): 90.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Falcon, "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie," *Sight and Sound* (May 1998): 12.

These perception and processing systems, and the environment and conditions that foster them are precisely what I aim to examine in this paper. Specifically, I will look at the relevance of a set contemporary French philosophers and theorists' (alternately and/or in concert Baudrillard, Virilio, Augé, Foucault, and Deleuze) views in relation to *Benny's Video*: The choice is not arbitrary. Haneke and these thinkers share an important common perspective in their respective endeavors, seeking to revive moribund fields with a respective cinematic/theoretical shock therapy. To cite one example, Michael Haneke has insisted that his intention is to create a "non-psychological" cinema: i.e., a cinema, in contrast to what he claims takes place in American films, that is inhabited by characters whose behavior is not easily explicable in sociological or psychological terms,<sup>3</sup> figures "who are less characters than projection-surfaces for the perceptions of the spectator."<sup>4</sup> The French contingency correspondingly rejects psychoanalysis and structural semiotics in their investigations of culture and society.<sup>5</sup> The following seeks to situate *Benny's Video* in the context of contemporary French thought, focusing on concepts like Augé's surmodernité and non-places, Baudrillard's simulcra and moving beyond Oedipal triangulation, and Deleuze's actual/virtual distinction. In the course of this work, I hope to show that *Benny's Video*

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<sup>3</sup> Falcon, Sight and Sound 12.

<sup>4</sup> Wolf Donner, "Das Gegenteil von Hollywood," Tip 12.1993: 35. France occupies a privileged space in relation to Haneke. It is there his trilogy found its most fervent fans (including at Cannes), in comparison to their comparatively cool reception in Austria. In addition, Haneke's two most recent films, *Code Inconnu* and *La pianiste*, were filmed with French actors; at the time of writing, Haneke works exclusively in France because of financial and ideological reasons (conversation with director, July 2002).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Deleuze: "I don't believe that linguistics and psychoanalysis offer a great deal to the cinema." Gregory Flaxman, The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 2000) 366.

not only actualizes, reflects, or modifies forms of these thinkers' theories, but that the bold impetus behind Haneke's cinematic program is matched by and somehow analogous to the theorists' way of seeing and perceiving society and culture.

**Setting: *surmodernité***

If Benny is a "child of the postmodern," as one critic claims,<sup>6</sup> what does his world look like? The following sets the theoretical scene for Benny's world, beginning with Marc Augé. The texts of Augé most relevant here are his works on an "anthropology of everyday life": *La traversée du Luxembourg*, *Un ethnologue dans le métro*, *Domaines et châteaux*, and *Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. The last work is perhaps most useful to this discussion. Augé investigates what form of obligation we encounter in the anonymous "non-places" of modern urban space: hotel rooms, supermarkets, ATM machines, and various spaces of transition and passage--like the conveyor belts that drag passengers slowly from one section of the airport to another. Augé's argument is that although we don't 'rest' or 'reside' in these spaces but merely pass through these spaces as if interchangeable, we nevertheless enjoy a contractual relation with the world and others symbolized by our train or plane ticket, bank card, e-mail address, and hence anonymity and identity are oddly drawn close. Augé infers from such spaces a paradox of what he calls "surmodernité," roughly translatable as "supermodernity" or "hypermodernity." In his own words:

"If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place . . . supermodernity produces non-places,

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Wessely, "Virtualität und Realität" *Utopie und Fragment* ed. Franz Grabner et al. (Thaur: Kulturverlag, 1996): 115.

meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of “places of memory,” and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position.”<sup>7</sup>

For Augé supermodernity functions as an aggregate effect of three (paradoxical) superabundances: (1) we experience a superabundance of time and history: there are too many events going on and too much news and information about them, and yet (or therefore) we find ourselves semiotically overloaded and unable to make sense of the past and experience the relation of the past to the future in terms of an eternal disappointment (with socialism, communism, etc.); (2) we experience an increasing sense of the vastness of the spaces we inhabit as these spaces expand and interpenetrate each other, and yet at the same time our urban spaces are increasingly homogenized and increasingly filled up; (3) we experience a simultaneous excess and deficiency of personal identity such that we have more and more ways of differentiating ourselves from others and identifying ourselves (driver’s license, passport, ATM card, identity cards) while at the same time personal identities become increasingly rigidified and formally interchangeable (everyone has same cards same differentiators).

This is Benny’s world. He wanders aimlessly and seemingly without motivation between Augé’s anonymous “transit points” and “temporary abodes”: McDonald’s, the video store, a club, the six-lane highway forever filled with traffic. (If his school doesn’t quite qualify it’s because it’s a station in Foucault’s discipline society with a twist: Benny sells drugs in the boys’ choir). When he and his mother go to Egypt, this too is a

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<sup>7</sup> Marc Augé, Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity Trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995) 77-8.

sprawl of non-places: hotel, tour guide, video camera, and back: *espace quelconque*.<sup>8</sup>

Benny could be anywhere; most important is the dialectic between anonymity and identity. And this is how Benny perceives the world: as an “anonymous user”, watching a filtered “virtual reality” without being seen himself.

### **Le virtuel et l’actuel**

“Through the permanent falsifying of the world in the media, leading us to only to perceive the world in terms of images, a dangerous situation is being created . . . a Coca-Cola advertisement takes on the same level of reality as news footage”

--Michael Haneke<sup>9</sup>

If Augé sets the scene and situates us in supermodernity--he puts us in Benny’s room filled with Japanese audiovisual equipment and a Mickey Mouse mask--Baudrillard turns on the video and open our eyes. For Baudrillard, in Augé’s supermodern moment the “simulacrum” is true; images and signs have come to stand for the objects and commodities that make up everyday life; signs now bear no relationship to any reality.<sup>10</sup>

“The very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction . . . the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is already reproduced. The hyperreal.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Baudrillard, the media play a conspiratorial role in the creation of this hyperreality. They fabricate non-communication and short-circuit history by

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<sup>8</sup> Haneke’s aesthetic of anonymity is perhaps most pronounced in his 1989 feature film debut, *Der siebente Kontinent*.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Falcon, *Sight and Sound* 12. Near the end of Michael Haneke’s 1997 film *Funny Games*, the following conversation takes place between the two killers, played by Arno Frisch (Benny in *Benny’s Video*) and Frank Giering: “Aber die Fiktion ist doch wirklich.--Wieso?--Na du siehst sie doch in dem Film.--Na klar!--Dann ist sie genauso wirklich wie die Wirklichkeit, die du genau siehst, oder?”

<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 83.

creating instant meaning . . . “a closed system of . . . signification from which no event escapes.”<sup>12</sup>

Although this schema from Baudrillard already represents a rich source for application to *Benny's Video*, I would first like to introduce a set of ideas from Deleuze/Guattari that extend and complicate this line of reasoning, namely the actual/virtual distinction. Deleuze seeks to replace the classical real/virtual (in the sense of unreal or “fiction”) opposition with an actual/virtual distinction. Although Deleuze distinguishes between the actual and the virtual, he nevertheless posits that both the actual and the virtual are real insofar as they exercise an effect on us: thus cultural expressions as well as media diarrhea are assigned an important weight. Deleuze’s proposition elevates them from Marx’s mere dialectically circumscribed superstructure of economic conditions: cultural expressions and images in themselves are capital in their own right.<sup>13</sup>

This conflation of the actual and the virtual (Deleuze) and the role of information providers and transmitters (Baudrillard) in the loss of this distinction is clearly one of the central problematics that Haneke seeks to address in the film. Benny is a video freak who has become accustomed to experiencing everything through the eye of the video camera. He dwells in a darkened room with the shades permanently drawn, while his video camera gazes onto the street and transmits the signal to a monitor. The “actual” reality on the street below is digitalized into a better consumable and moreover better

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<sup>11</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 146.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1981), 175.

controllable “virtual” reality. Foucault designates this voyeur’s gaze, “a superb formula: power exercised continuously for what turns out to be minimal cost.”<sup>14</sup>

In this Benny is only replicating the organizing principle of “actual” and “virtual” he receives from TV transmissions: in other words, none. Benny watches a news report on neo-Nazis in Greifswald next to a splatter film next to a documentary on Bosnia. Zap, zap, zap: seamless channel surfing.<sup>15</sup> This (lack of) distinction is further illuminated (and once more electronically reproduced) in Benny’s videos, those privileged items conflated in the title’s singular referent: is “Benny’s Video” his footage of the pig slaughter or the document of his murder? And isn’t the title saying that it’s both; they’re both just as real, just as they are equally actual/virtual to Benny? In fact, because of his inability to distinguish to between the real and the mediated or the actual and the virtual, it is not possible for Benny to realize the consequences of his action; only at the end of the film does he realize that there is not rewind button in life (which he searches for immediately after he shoots the girl).<sup>16</sup>

But for as much as Benny is unable to distinguish between the actual and the virtual or the real and the mediated and the extent to which the distinction is in some ways irrelevant in the supermodern moment, Benny does have a desire for some sense of

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<sup>13</sup> Summarized from Patricia Pisters, “Glamour and Glycerine” Micropolitics of Media Culture: Reading the Rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari ed. Patricia Pisters (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2001): 128-129.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Norman Denzin, The Cinematic Society: the Voyeur’s Gaze (London: Sage, 1995): 1.

<sup>15</sup> The effect is clearly intentional on Haneke’s part: “Kinder und Jugendliche wachsen heute auf mit einem Medium, das die dokumentarische Gewalt genauso behandelt wie die fingierte, fiktive, also Jugoslawien genauso wie den “Terminator.” Das Kind, diesen verschiedenen Realitäten ausgesetzt, braucht Unterscheidungshilfen, um ein normales Verhältnis zur Realität zu entwickeln.” Tip: 35, 38.

<sup>16</sup> In a clever bit of cross-referentiality, Arno Frisch’s character in Haneke’s 1997 film *Funny Games* \*is\* able to rewind the narrative and replay an unfortunate situation to his own liking.

the “real.” After all, his stated reason for killing the girl in the first place is “to see how it is.” Baudrillard comments on this nostalgia for the “real.” According to him, in the postmodern, there develops a preoccupation with authenticity, and an “escalation of the true, of lived experience . . . a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential.”<sup>17</sup> The premium on the real and lived experience only underscores the extent to which the Benjamin’s ‘aura’ that previously surrounded lived experience like the aura of the original work of art, has been erased. They have both become reproductions, separated/able from their original time and place; they now have become commodities that circulate inside the simulational model of communication. We are beyond mechanical reproduction, beyond electronic reproduction to Paul Virilio’s “electro-optical fetishism.”

Of course Benny isn’t seeking the modernist form of authenticity as theorized by Benjamin; his desire for the “real” is a mediated version, which he betrays in his formulation: he wants to “see” how it is. Benny wants to be the agent in a killing, but more importantly, he wants to \*see\* himself on his monitor killing, he wants to be able to rewind, slow-down, and edit the act on his console. For Benny, the experience of this after-the-fact “virtual reality” is even more dramatic than the actual deed itself--it is more important and somehow more “real” to him--e.g. he spends much more time viewing and re-viewing the video than cleaning up the body.

### **Eros is sick: Communication and Capital**

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<sup>17</sup> Baudrillard, Simulations 12-13.



The subtitle of *Benny's Video* in the scheme of Haneke's Vergletscherungs-Trilogie is "Vergletscherung der Gefühle." The idea that we live in an age in which emotions are dulled, communication is in breakdown, and relationships are eroding and losing connectivity is widespread. In this section I want to explore this idea and its intimate relation to capitalist modes of production via the writings of Deleuze and then look at the application of these ideas in *Benny's Video*.

Deleuze's refrain in *The Time-Image* is "Eros is sick." According to Deleuze, in the general shock and disillusionment following the war we lost our belief in our own place on earth and in the connection between humans and the world they are devastating. Deleuze also extends this metaphor to the realm of cinema and cultural productions: The human form of Eros is the social link that binds humans in relationships--communal relations, sexual relations, image-relations. Libido is the stuff of relation, Eros making the linkage between images, between inside-brain and outside-world, between humans, humans and animal, with earth. If we have lost the world, as Deleuze says, if Eros is sick, it is because relations (sexual, social, affective, episto-phenomenological) mediated by a signifier that keeps up us unconscious of their erotic-aggressive condition have broken down and, here it comes, only money-power differentials link one "character" to another, one movement or gesture to another, in a chain of erotic-aggressive attitudes. Money, the diffuse conspiracy of capital, is the immanent symptom of our "universal schizophrenia."<sup>18</sup>

To hit pause quickly to apply this set of ideas to *Benny's Video* we see how the breakdown of communication and relationships in the bourgeois family yields to a power

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structure defined, organized, and enervated by capital. The apartment is divided into plots of land marked by an unspoken respect of private ownership: the father deems the doorway to Benny's room as a magical border (property) that he cannot step over (capitalism triumphs over parenting). In addition, Benny's parents subscribe to a form of *Zettelerziehung*: they parent with notes and bills. Benny wakes up to notes that say that the money on the table is to buy lunch or "x" (capitalism as parenting).<sup>19</sup> Ironically (or not, when perceived through Deleuze's eyes), communication between father and son doesn't change after Benny's murder comes to light. Benny makes no attempt to speak to his father, who must virtually conduct an interrogation to ascertain anything. The father, for his part, keeps his distance, and seems almost more annoyed than shocked about Benny's deed: probably a fitting reaction for someone more concerned with a potential loss of social standing and image (high "image" capital=career advancement) than with the moral ramifications of Benny's act--not to mention attempting to read a potential "cry for help" from Benny (if we see Benny's act in this sense, then he is the only one trying to communicate--and what does it say that violence is the only remaining option for Benny to communicate, to attempt to get his parents' attention?). Benny's mother is merely an emotional wreck, vacillating from silence to outbursts of tears: truly coming to terms with the situation (*Trauerarbeit*) in a dialogue with Benny it is not. And if capitalism causes schizophrenia, the symptoms are surely legible in Benny's situation.

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<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Time-Image* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Heberjam (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989), 210. This is also the main idea behind *Anti-Oedipus*.

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze paraphrased: "Capital, with its differential signifier, is the dynamic temporal form of the "conspiracy of unequal exchange" that coerces and controls the affect and movement of bodies, signs, and images. It is an influencing machine that produces in its own subject the vaguely conscious sensation of a diffuse world conspiracy that is organizing the misery." See Peter Canning, "The Imagination of Immanence" 346. See also Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*, 210 and Deleuze, *The Time-Image*, 77.

The taciturn boy at home is drug dealer at choir practice, brute in computer class, and murderer when his parents aren't around.

### **L'anti-OEdipe=Narcissus?**

“The digital Narcissus replaces the triangular Oedipus . . . the clone will henceforth be your guardian angel . . . consequently you will never be alone again.”

--Jean Baudrillard<sup>20</sup>

Commentators on *Benny's Video* nearly unanimously cite Benny's murder of the nameless girl he meets at the video store to be the key scene in the film. Like the two other panels in Haneke's triptych (the family's suicide at the conclusion of *Der siebente Kontinent* and when the student runs amok at the end of *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie eines Zufalls*), a murder serves as the focal point of *Benny's Video*. This moment is the nexus for the critics' respective agendas--moral/theological issues, formal concerns (Haneke's denial of unmediated visual access to the murder), violence in film, etc.

As important as I recognize this scene to be in the film, in this section of the paper I am most interested in what this scene isn't--what this scene displaces. Of the three films in the trilogy, *Benny's Video* is most aesthetically and formally conventional and mainstream.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for example, when Benny brings the girl back to his place after meeting her at the video store, the spectator expects (both by conditioning via traditional cinematic narratives as well as through the way Haneke conventionally stages the meeting) a sexual encounter: boy meets girl, girl meets boy, boy kisses girl . . .

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<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction* (Paris: Denoel-Gonthier, 1979), 235.

. Instead, in this film, boy meets girl, boy kills girl. What should be Benny's first sexual experience becomes a violent act that he records and ritually rehashes. The sexual act comes after the violent one--in an auto-erotic spectacle, Benny strips naked and observes himself in the mirror, smearing himself with the girl's blood.<sup>22</sup>

I posit that this scene is the cinematic confirmation of the Baudrillard quotation above: in the postmodern moment the myth of Narcissus is now the guiding myth/trajectory/paradigm that structures experience and narrative, rather than the Oedipus initiation story. This is sealed when he rearranges the girl's shirt so that she is "properly" covered, a lack of curiosity that further distances him from normative heterosexuality. If the Oedipal myth in its various hetero- and homoerotic forms functions to reproduce the idea that human subjectivity is sexually realized in the bonded, love relationship, then the Baudrillardian Narcissus myth as found in *Benny's Video* instructs Benny that mediated, digitally manipulable violence is the "authentic" experience in a "me" world without connections, so why not "see how it is"? Benny comes of age not through sexual conquest and replacing a mother figure<sup>23</sup> but rather by

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<sup>21</sup> Amos Vogel, "Of Nonexisting Continents: The Cinema of Michael Haneke," Film Comment 32.4 (July-August 1996): 74: "The second film in the trilogy, *Benny's Video*, is perhaps the most accessible, ultimately most horrific film of the three."

<sup>22</sup> There is a real temptation to read this scene as a very Lacanian moment. I would be quick to interject, however, that there is not even a misrecognition in Benny's gaze, nor any sort of recognition: Benny is so semiotically impotent/incapacitated, he lacks even the potential of subjectivity. I see his bodily inscriptions as another futile attempt at communication.

<sup>23</sup> Those looking for an Oedipal trajectory here can find one: only in reverse. After the murder, Benny and his mother are the couple in the film, (especially in Egypt and especially as Benny videotapes his mother urinating)--i.e. the girl is eliminated so that Benny's desire can be displaced to the mother who he previously showed little care for. Or maybe the couple in the film is announced in the title: Benny and his video (videos, video equipment, etc.....)?

eliminating/killing the potential object of desire and distancing himself into the cave/care of video equipment, over which he commands absolute control.<sup>24</sup>

## Credits

What is control for Benny? The answer is simple and clearly displayed on all of his video devices: REWIND--pig is dead, rewind, pig is alive. Rewind means the ability to control “reality”, to create it, and then re-create it as memory. As Herbert Hrachovec observes: “Videorecorder sind symptomatisch für ein System, in dem der Bildinput belanglos wird. Interessanter erscheinen die Möglichkeiten, die Eingabe zu manipulieren.”<sup>25</sup> But, in the world of *Benny’s Video* who is really doing the manipulation, who controls what is “real” and who creates memories? The title of Michael Haneke’s feature names the two “main characters” in the film: Benny, the pubescent Viennese video freak, and video, in its manifold meanings and implications. Was the genitive correctly applied to the signifier “Benny” as the possessor rather than the possessed in this formulation? In the midst of Augé’s supermodernity with Deleuze’s sick Eros and Baudrillard’s digitalized Narcissus rearing its ugly head, the question has ceased to be “what’s on?”, but rather “who’s got the remote?”

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<sup>24</sup> A useful exercise might be to compare Benny to the teenager in *American Beauty*, a character whose verisimilitude vis-à-vis Benny suggests either a rather generous case of borrowing by Sam Mendes or proves Baudrillard true in his thoughts on the ubiquity of this situation, etc. In that film, the teenager is a drug dealer, an obsessive voyeur who records everything on video, and lives in an oppressive/dysfunctional family situation. The crucial difference is that he strives for the heterosexual coupling he finds with the neighbor’s daughter. Benny, in contrast, kills the analogous character.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Hrachovec, “Heimelektronik und Heimnachteil: Michael Hanekes Benny’s Video,” *Der neue österreichische Film* ed. Gottfried Schlemmer (Vienna: Wespennest, 1996): 287.

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