

Invitations to Island and Riverside, Not Continent: Gleams of Happiness for a Domephobic Family

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Stefan Ramaekers and Naomi Hodgson's article, *Educational Transformation and the Force of Film: Viewing Michael Haneke's The Seventh Continent*, demonstrates the usage of a film as teaching material from a Cavellian philosophical perspective. In order to encourage the authors to provide audiences with further details about how Cavell's thought might contribute to the development of educational theory, this response re-examines *The Seventh Continent* from an educational perspective associated with ideas of hope and happiness. In particular, two possible arguments about the film are provided.

In advance of this, I will give a summary of the film. *The Seventh Continent*, inspired by actual incidents, portrays the daily life of the Schobers, an Austrian family (Georg Schober: father/husband; Anna Schober: mother/wife; Evi Schober: their daughter), over three separate years, 1987, 1988, and 1989. Each year, in addition to doing household chores in their suburban house, Georg commutes by car to his job at the lab/factory. Anna works with her brother as an optician. Eva, an elementary school student, goes to school. There are no friends depicted, but some relatives are shown. Anna's parents have passed away, and her (unmarried) brother seems to be suffering from depression. Georg's parents are still alive, living in a mountainous ski resort, about one day's drive away from Georg's house. The film ends when the family commits suicide by overdosing on medications, at home, after destroying their belongings.

The film made me feel out of place because it is totally hopeless and depressing with regard to family life. Throughout the film's duration, I could not stop asking: Is this film fundamentally educational? What is the educationally distinctive quality of this movie? My unbalanced feelings were partly caused by the disparity between the content of the movie and the easy-going educational setting in which the authors presented it; there did not appear to be a specific educational goal to the showing. It is important for students to feel/think freely about this movie, but I believe that this particular movie must be shown with at least one educational purpose: to think about what kind of education is needed in order for this family to avoid their tragic ending. I agree with Ramaekers and Hodgson's point that the film provides an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the family unit, the role of a parent, or domestic life. However, is there any particular benefit in learning the meaning of family life from such a bad example?

The film applies many tricks of visibility, including the symbol of hope for the family, a photo of Australia, which appears occasionally throughout the film. The photo, which depicts an ocean beach, rocks, and blue sky, presented with a soundtrack of lapping water, seems intended to correspond with the title of the movie,

The Seventh Continent. However, ocean beach, rocks, blue sky, and ripples are the images often associated with island resorts for tourists. Thus, the film's image of hope allows me to interpret that the Schobers actually dream of going to the edges of this continent, from which it is possible to escape – or an island, perhaps. Their hope certainly is founded on a utopian fantasy more akin to island life than suburban life. My recommendation as the best utopia for them is the isolated land of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*,¹ where the repetition of daily life is identified not as boring and consumption-oriented, but as a joyful thing and an art form. Furthermore, the understanding of subjectivity and objectivity in *Herland* are totally different from those in masculine, capitalist society.

The feminist philosopher of education Nel Noddings claims that happiness should be the purpose of education, and that the foundations of happiness stand on the quality of family life.² She argues that, even though it is important to learn how to be a good family, there is almost no chance to do so in contemporary society. Jane Roland Martin points out that in order to learn/teach what a good family and home life is, education should emphasize the moral values of the 3 Cs (Care, Concern, Connection) over the values of the 3 Rs (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic).³ As it is apparent in the film that the Schober family is lacking in terms of the 3 Cs, Martin would diagnose the cause of the family suicide as *domephobia*⁴ – those who are indifferent to the value of the 3 Cs in their lives.

An educational cure for domephobia would be a discussion of the relationship between happiness and visibility. This family's happiness is inversely demonstrated as a conflict between daughter and mother. Early on in the movie, there is a scene at school involving Eva, in which her teacher prevents her from using the bathroom to punish her for pretending to be blind. After school, as punishment, Anna slaps Eva. That evening, in Eva's bedroom, Anna finds a newspaper article about a girl Eva's age, which reads, "I am happy even though I am blind." Through this scene we understand that Eva acted like a blind person at school because she thought that, if she were blind, she would be happy. In other words, Eva wants to be happy in a way that is counter to the way that her mother understands happiness. Eva's attempt at happiness has insulted her mother's occupation as an optician, whose meaning of existence is founded on the visible. In other words, happiness cannot be objectively assessed. We see this again when, despite the family's destruction of all their possessions inside the house, they leave the outer image of the house intact, allowing others to continue assuming that the inside of the house is unchanged, even as a mass suicide is underway within.

As a second argument, I ask you to imagine the family by the side of the River Styx, twisting *The Seventh Continent* in the opposite direction, i.e. changing its way of understanding life and death. Here, *After Life*⁵ (although the direct translation of the Japanese title would be *Wonderful Life*) is suggested as a corresponding example. *After Life* is a fictional film describing the weekly routine of an office in Limbo. In the film, the dead need to stay at the Limbo office for seven days after they die. Every Monday, fresh dead people arrive at the office of Limbo and leave for the other world/heaven on Saturday. In order to finalize their lives in preparation for their

journey to the other world, they are required to choose the most precious memory from their lives by Thursday. On Friday, the chosen memory is visualized as a film. Then, on Saturday, they all see the film together. When each dead soul is fulfilled with the most meaningful memory of his or her life, it is time to leave for the other world. Dead people choose various memories but, visually, these are visually not the film's exciting moments (they are not even shown in the film). In this way, as in *The Seventh Continent*, *After Life* interprets visuals as just a stepping stone to inform the meaning of happiness and life.

After Life is different from *The Seventh Continent* in terms of its understanding of death. Unlike *The Seventh Continent*, which goes from life to death, *After Life* starts from death and looks back at life. *After Life* also emphasizes continuity and bridges the gap between death and life. Thus, in the context of *After Life*, the Schober family's hopeless dead-end does not mean anything. In the context of *After Life*, Georg, Anna, and Eva would, individually, be required to find the most meaningful moment of their lives, thereby conditioning their soul to happiness. The imaginative expansion of *After Life* gives audiences an educational opportunity to discuss subjectivity and objectivity through affirmation.

To summarize my response, here I have offered two questions about Ramaekers and Hodgson's arguments. These were expressed in terms of feminist thinkers' ways of understanding education and happiness, and by another film about life and death. These responses will hopefully inspire further explanation about the relationship between *The Seventh Continent* and the ideas of subjectivity and objectivity in Cavell's philosophical context.

1. See Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979). The novel was originally published in 1915.

2. See Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

3. See Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

4. Martin, *The Schoolhome*.

5. Hirokazu Koreeda, *Wandafuru raifu* (1998); <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0165078/>. This film was released at Toronto Film Festival in 1998. Special thanks to René Arcilla who recommended me to experience this film in Fall 2014 in New York City.