Michael Haneke & the Importance of Presentation

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, Austrian born director Michael Haneke has become one of the most discussed auteurs in contemporary cinema. Citing filmmakers such as Robert Bresson and Michelangelo Antonioni as major influences, Haneke's signature brand of cold, detached filmmaking recontextualizes their attitudes and approaches.[1] While even his early works brim with these influences, it was not until his move to France in the early 2000s that he became more focused in his intentions. From that point on, Haneke began to receive international acclaim and has earned many critical accolades, including two Palme d'Or awards for his films at the Cannes Film Festival. His influence can be seen in the works of countless other auteurs, like Greek filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos and Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund. While Haneke is not the first to engage with the ideas and presentation choices that permeate his contemporary filmography, he has opened valuable doors in film discourse to topics such as exploring modes of presentation in filmmaking, examining critiques of spectatorship, and making trenchant social commentary, usually about members of the upper class.

Similar to Antonioni, Haneke explores ambiguity, although the two auteurs have very different reasonings when it comes to why they explore it. For Antonioni, the ambiguity is meant to encourage the viewer to consider the existential and

[1] "Michael Haneke's 10 Favorite Films."

metaphysical concerns of his films.[2] For Haneke, it is much more about making the viewer aware of the impossibility of recreating an empirical reality in cinema. Haneke views film as a reflection of our world in some way, although it cannot be a completely objective reflection. Haneke is aware that his films are not portraying actual reality, but he still believes that by using effective modes of realism and leaving room for personal interpretation, that they can create an effective impression of it.[3] An important part of his filmmaking philosophy is his interest in emphatically presenting a constructed reality on film. In doing this, Haneke hopes to give audiences the opportunity to consider the power cinema has as a tool for creative manipulation.

Haneke achieves his cinematic style through his use of various techniques. He usually presents scenes in wide-angle shots, with a static camera, so that the visual language of a given scene is understated. When the camera does move, it is only to follow the action of a scene and is usually kept at a distance from the subject of the shot, maintaining the wide-angles that make up most of his work. Haneke's goal is to allow the story to be told through what is shown in the frame of a shot, with minimal bias from a subjective perspective. His actors deliver nuanced, understated performances, with very few scenes of conventional dramatic intensity. Just like Bresson would choose to tell a story in a flattened, minimalistic fashion to create a sense of the natural world independent from

[2] Perez, Gilberto. Pp. 248.
[3] Brunette, Peter. Pp. 9.

cinema, Haneke wishes to focus on the concrete. The primary difference between the two directors is that where Bresson's interests ultimately lie in the spiritual, Haneke's focus lies purely in what can be tangibly observed.[4]

Perhaps the most easily identifiable cinematic technique Haneke uses to create a sense of constructed reality is in his use of sound. Besides *Funny Games*, Haneke uses diegetic sound exclusively in all of his films, believing that a score or soundtrack is too manipulative, and usually exists as another layer that separates audiences from the reality that is created in a film. The way natural sound is mixed in Haneke's soundtrack is meticulous. His films are brought to life by the sounds of cars passing outside of windows and prolonged silences most films would aim to avoid. The lack of non-diegetic music to cue the emotion of a scene can also add a layer of distance to the storytelling that aids in giving his work the clinical and detached feeling that he is famous for.

In his book *Michael Haneke*, Peter Brunette breaks down the filmmaker's desire to present scenarios ambiguously, stating that "according to Haneke, films can never, by definition, show reality as a whole, so fragmentation is the only honest way to proceed."[5] Haneke does not want to explore metaphysical ideas with his insistent ambiguity, so much as he wants to make the viewers of his films aware of how much cannot be perceived or understood outside of the film. This manifests itself in the multitude of interpretations that have been applied to his

[4] Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film*, pp. 64-69. Da Capo Press Inc., 1972.
[5] Brunette. p. 8.

works, in that nearly every story he has told in his films raises questions that are never answered.

Catherine Wheatley, in her book *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image*, argues more specifically about the morality of his movies. Wheatley believes that his cinema goes even further than just forcing the audience to consider realism in cinema, and leads to an "ethical reflexivity," where the audience questions their own morals.[6] She elaborates that Haneke uses the medium not just to create a more realistic aesthetic, but also to force audiences to think about how movies are intended to be perceived and engaged with. She notes that "Haneke's work stands in a tradition of films that reflect upon their own construction, attempting to understand the rules or norms that govern and sustain them."[7] Wheatley writes primarily about the critiques of spectatorship in Haneke's work. She states:

> on an implicit level, [Haneke's] films prompt their spectators to ask: How are we complicit with the apparatus? What are the moral consequences of this? Why, upon watching Haneke's films, do we so often feel irritated, cross, even guilty?[8]

Beyond his thoughts on modes of presentation, Haneke's films usually attempt to comment on the social climate of First-World Europe. The films focus on members of the wealthy upper class, depicting their alienation, social disconnection, and overall lack of perspective. This same disconnection can be

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[6] Wheatley, Catherine. pp. 3-5.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Wheatley. p. 5.

found in many of Antonioni's films like *L'Avventura* (1960) and *L'Eclisse* (1962) — although it usually exists in his films as a means to discuss more abstract themes rooted in existential thought. Another point of recurrence in his work is the depiction of those in privileged positions ignoring or failing to acknowledge the shortcomings and flaws that they themselves are responsible for. Because of this, Haneke's films are often viewed as containing political discourse. While the political elements of Haneke's work are significant, some argue that his films do not necessarily need to be looked at as "political films" in order to gain a valuable understanding and appreciation of them. Wheatley, for example, sees his acknowledgement of current issues as purely philosophical and moral, and not political. According to her,

> the philosophy of an ethical problem [in Haneke's films], while it may have social implications, is not normally couched in terms of political ideology or power but in terms that are specifically moral... The language of philosophical ethics is the language in which Haneke himself discusses his work.[9]

Still, philosophical ethics are not as far removed from the politics of his cinema as Wheatley implies in her writings. Ben McCann and David Sorfa, in their book, *The Cinema of Michael Haneke: Europe Utopia*, see the political elements of Haneke as essential to the art he creates. Specifically, they cite a DVD interview with Haneke on his film *Caché* (2005). Haneke explains that the film, despite citing very specific historical events, could take place in any culture. He claims that these

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[9] Wheatley. p. 4.

kinds of issues become present in all societies. McCann and Sorfa state that "he does not seek to represent or comment on a particular political problem but rather to draw attention to the inevitably political nature of the personal."[10]

The cinema of Michael Haneke has a clear and distinct importance. His eclectic presentation style takes many of the outlooks of significant art filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s, eschewing their metaphysical concerns and reframing them under a colder and more clinical nihilism. His films demonstrate a mastery over the craft that is rarely seen in filmmaking. This is demonstrated by how intertwined the different aspects of his cinema are. His critiques of spectatorship would not be present without his insistence on utilizing unconventional modes of presentation like using only diegetic sound and employing minimalist camera work. Haneke's concerns regarding spectatorship are also in service of the social commentary that he wants his audience to consider. With many of his issues with the current social climate being rooted in people's refusal to properly recognize societal flaws, it is no surprise that Haneke's works encourage the scrutinization of more conventional filmmaking. He feels that traditional techniques are usually in service of fantasy entertainment, and too often tend to stifle meaningful discussion. The fact that Haneke's films are able to create such broad and powerful implications with the aid of the cinematic form makes him a remarkable director, and looking at his work from 2000 and on demonstrates this fact.

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[10] McCann and Sorfa. p. 76.

Code Unknown

In his debut French film, *Code Unknown* (2000), Haneke shines an unflinching light on racial and class disparity. A series of intersecting episodes, *Code Unknown* documents the profound effect of one caucasian boy's hostile act when a Malian boy confronts him about it, leading to an altercation that results in police intervention. Jean, the French boy had littered by throwing a half-eaten pastry at a female beggar sitting on the sidewalk named Maria. After the incident, Maria is deported to her home country of Romania, and Amadou, the Malian boy, is beaten by the police and made to feel ashamed, while Jean is left to go home completely free of blame or responsibility. The results of the event that day are massive for Maria and Amadou, but are minimal for Jean, the brother of a war photographer dating an actress. Jean's upper class life is essentially worry free while he stays with them. While the society Haneke depicts is heavily biased in favor of Jean and his family, Maria and Amadou are able to find a happiness and value in their lives that Jean, his brother and his girlfriend cannot seem to attain.

This film is an early example of Haneke addressing themes that would go on to be his primary concerns. Anne and Georges, Jean's sister-in-law and brother, suffer from the social disconnection and lack of perspective that Haneke's upper class characters usually do — while Maria, Amadou and their respective families suffer from violence and the lack of respect that First-World Europe has for them. The film also uses its non-linear format to make a statement about

cultural alienation, and one's inability to perceive the entirety of reality. Most of the short scenes that make up the film are single takes and focus on a specific character related to Jean, Amadou, and Maria. Through seeing the effect that the singular event had on each family, or lack thereof, Haneke demonstrates the disparities of their lives. Peter Brunette writes that the thematic purpose behind the interwoven narrative of *Code Unknown*, represents a core aspect of Michael Haneke's identity as a filmmaker:

> Haneke seems to be insisting on the total lack of human sensitivity that reigns in this urban environment, even to the point of irrationality, compounded by the multiple cultures and languages that lead to further confusion and irritation.[11]

The Piano Teacher

Haneke's 2001 film *The Piano Teacher* serves as an interesting illustration of Haneke's filmmaking ethos. Based on Elfriede Jelinek's 1983 novel of the same title, it is the only film that Haneke has adapted from pre-existing material. The plot of *The Piano Teacher* focuses on an adult woman named Erika Kohut and her abusive relationship with her elderly mother. Throughout the story, we learn that Kohut is sexually, emotionally, and psychologically repressed to an extreme degree. This results in her character engaging in self-mutilation, as well as having manifested intensely violent sexual desires like being gagged and punched in the stomach. She also has an intense need to control everything in her life. She becomes engaged in a relationship with a young male student of hers, Walter

[11] Brunette. p. 75.

Klemmer, which proves to be equally as unhealthy as her relationship with her mother. Erika's relationships between these two characters prompts an examination of the themes of repression and the dynamics of power, sex, and love. On the surface, the plot of the the film is quite similar to Jelinek's novel; however Haneke's method of telling of the story varies considerably. The result studies the same themes and characters, but in a completely different way, reflecting Haneke's methodology as a filmmaker.

For example, both written and filmed versions open with the same scene. Erika arrives home late and gets into an argument with her mother, a character who remains nameless. Contrasting the opening chapter of the novel with the film's opening scene demonstrates how Haneke's style radically departs from the source material in in its presentation. In the novel, the scene opens as follows:

> The piano teacher, Erika Kohut, bursts like a whirlwind into the apartment she shares with her mother. Mama likes calling Erika her little whirlwind, for the child can be an absolute speed demon. She is trying to escape her mother.[12]

The straightforward but descriptive writing style used by Jelinek establishes Erika as full of energy and emotion, while also quickly giving the reader a basic understanding of how Erika perceives her mother.

Jelinek continues describing Erika's life, going further into her relationship with her mother:

[12] Jelinek, Elfriede. pp. 2.

> Erika is in her late thirties. Her mother is old enough to be her grandmother… Her father promptly left, passing the torch to his daughter. Erika entered, her father exited. Eventually, Erika learned how to move swiftly... hoping to get to her room without being seen. But her mother looms before her, confronts her. She puts Erika against the wall, under interrogation — inquisitor and executioner in one... She investigates: Why has Erika come home so late? Erika dismissed her last student three hours ago, after heaping him with scorn. You must think I won't find out where you've been, Erika. A child should own up to her mother without being asked. But Mother never believes her because Erika tends to lie.[13]

The tone of Jelinek's prose reveals a bitter contempt that encapsulates the mother's nature in relation to Erika. She is not just a mother; she is a terrorizer. The way that she talks to her daughter is the way that a parent would scold a young child, but Erika, as previously stated, is a grown woman. Within the first paragraph, it is made clear that Erika's relationship with her mother is not only unpleasant, but is also emotionally abusive and manipulative. The unhealthiness of their relationship only becomes more clear as the story unfolds. With a sardonic tone, Jelinek breaks down how Erika's mother seeks to control every aspect of her life, from how she spends her own money to the clothes she wears. The confrontation ends with Erika in a fit of rage, grabbing her mother's hair and violently pulling it from her scalp.

In contrast, Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* opens with a wide-angle shot of the inside of the door to Erika's apartment. For a few seconds, the closed door is still on the screen before slowly opening as Erika cautiously enters. Isabelle Huppert plays Kohut with a quiet urgency that diverges from the "whirlwind" that

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[13] Ibid. pp. 2.

Jelinek describes. Huppert — in collaboration with Haneke — chooses to create layers over the emotional anguish that Kohut experiences, whereas the novel chooses to lay that anguish bare for the reader to see right away. The initial shot of the sequence follows Erika into the apartment as her mother begins to berate her, stealing her handbag and proceeding to look through it. The sound of a television can be heard in the background as Erika leaves the shot to go to her room. The film then cuts to a medium shot of Erika looking through her closet only to find that her mother has gotten rid of some of her clothing without her permission. Returning to the foyer, the next shot is again a medium shot, as Erika returns to continue her argument with her mother. The film then quickly cuts to the mother's face in another medium shot, as she makes an excuse for getting rid of the outfit. Cutting back to Erika in the following medium shot, the argument escalates until Erika grabs her mother by the hair as the mother begins to scream. There is then a quick cut to after their argument is over, which does not show the moment where Erika pulls the hair out of her mother's scalp.

Where Jelinek's prose is meant to reflect the attitudes of the characters, Haneke presents the situation with a cool detachment. Haneke frames every shot as minimally and neutrally as possible. Whereas the violence of Erika tearing her mother's hair out is described in visceral detail in the novel, it is not even shown in the film. Haneke does not offer anything in the way of explanation to the viewer. Instead, the relationship between Erika and her mother only becomes clear

through watching the two interact. There is no mention of her father or of Erika's childhood as there is in the book. There is also no explicit stating of her goals as a character. By the end of the scene in the film, much less interior information is known about Erika than in the end of the paragraph in the book; nevertheless, the essence of the scene, as well its thematic purpose to the story, remains.

This is not the only scene in the film where Haneke removed backstory from the novel for the film. In a 2017 interview on the Criterion Collection's DVD release of *The Piano Teacher*, Haneke had this to say.

> I don't think explanations work well in a film, so I left that out completely, but in order to show certain things, I introduced another mother-daughter relationship… you might say they depict a younger version of the same dilemma… instead of laying out Erika's entire backstory, I introduced this parallel narrative.[14]

The "parallel narrative" that Haneke is talking about here is that of Anna Schober and Anna's mother. Anna is a student of Kohut's, and her mother has pushed her incredibly hard to become a great concert pianist. The way that Erika reacts to Anna and her mother's relationship directly comments on Erika's upbringing, as opposed to saying it outright.

Haneke also notably altered Walter Klemmer as a character. In her novel, Jelinek gives Klemmer's internal thoughts, explaining his selfishness and deliberate ill intention in the relationship between himself and Erika. Walter finds Kohut attractive and wants to use her for his own sexual gratification. He sees

[14] Haneke, Michael. The Criterion Collection.

Erika and her repression as a goal to be conquered.[15] While this is a viable interpretation in the film, Haneke is sure to make it only one of many possible options. In the above mentioned home video interview, Haneke discusses a more substantial change he made to the character.

> In the novel the young man [Walter] is simply an asshole. That doesn't work well in a film, it comes across as too simplistic... I can't be so relentlessly critical of a character in a film, it's not interesting. It's a smug, know-it-all attitude. It can work in a written context, but images are images, and situations are situations… I believe the essence of drama is that it only shows a snippet of a life and that this snippet creates connections… but always in the minds of viewers, who must bring their own associations to it to be able to interpret what's happening... If the film itself explains why things are as they are, it becomes deadly dull.[16]

This quotation speaks to what is perhaps the most important part of how Haneke believes that a story should be told cinematically, highlighting the difference between writing a story in a novel and showing it in a film. For him, a novel is written from specific points of view, and can therefore make assertions about characters. But films do not do the same. This ties into the importance of ambiguity in his films as discussed by Peter Brunette.[17] An image in a film must show, and not tell, Haneke asserts. Where the reader of a novel can take the words on a page and consider them, a film viewer must instead deal with the images on screen, as well as the dialogue spoken.

Time of the Wolf

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[15] Jelinek. pp. 34-35.
[16] Haneke, Michael. The Criterion Collection.
[17] Brunette. p. 8.

Haneke's 2003 film *Time of the Wolf* does not address many of the same concepts as Haneke's other films, but his core ethos is still strongly present. Taking place in a post-apocalyptic France after some sort of undescribed disaster, *Time of the Wolf* focuses on Anne, a woman who must survive with her two children after her husband is violently killed. While desensitization through media is not a theme present in *Time of the Wolf*, Haneke uses the apocalypse to discuss the ideas of human alienation, cruelty, and violence in society much like in his previous films. On her journey to find a semblance of civilization, traveling through darkness and fog, Anne encounters countless people. Each are self interested in their own way, and serve to prove Haneke's point about the world we are currently living in; selfishness and barbarism rule. As soon as society begins to collapse, people will find any way that they can to maintain power or control. In one particularly heartbreaking scene, a group of traveling horsemen selling clean water refuse to give any to a dehydrated baby because the infant's parents could not offer anything of value in return. Knowing that the baby would likely die soon without it, the riders callously ride off, leaving the baby's mother in tears.

Through stripping away the veneer of polite society, Haneke gets to the heart of what he feels is the truth about the world we live in. "Civilization" is nothing more than a construct wherein human beings hide their selfishness and cruelty behind. Despite the seemingly negative outlook, Haneke still remains as impartial as he can be. A subplot in the film that comes to a head in the climax has the

potential to offer a counterpoint about human nature. Benny, Anne's son, hears a legend about a group of defenders who sacrifice themselves by throwing their naked bodies on a burning bonfire. In doing this, they offer themselves up for the safety of everyone else. Near the film's climax, Benny strips, lights a bonfire, and nearly throws himself in, when he is stopped by a guard. The guard was previously introduced as a selfish character, as he attempted to organize a lynching for what may be xenophobically-motivated reasons. Now he is selflessly saving this young boy at his own risk. "You were ready to do it. That's enough," he tells Benny.[18] This moment of human tenderness amidst the bleak backdrop of the film leaves the potential for some kind of hope for humanity, and leaves the overall message about human nature ambiguous.

Caché

Haneke's 2005 film *Caché* has been one of his most acclaimed, earning him the best director award at the Cannes Film Festival, as well as earning the number twenty-three spot on BBC Culture's list of the best 100 films of the 21st century.[19] *Caché* is an unconventional thriller about a man named Georges who receives mysterious videotape recordings of his home, accompanied by unsettling drawings. As can be expected from Haneke, no answer as to who specifically sent Georges the tapes is ever given, as the focus of the film is not on "who?" but "why?" It is revealed over the course of the film that the mysterious tapes are

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[18] Haneke, Michael, director. *Time of the Wolf Le Temps Du Loup*.
[19] "Culture - The 21st Century's 100 Greatest Films."

linked to event in Georges' past. As a child, he wronged an Algerian boy named Majid who was living with Georges' affluent family after the boy's parents were killed in the Paris massacre of 1961. While Georges' parents were planning on adopting Majid, Georges spread lies about him being ill and threatening him — causing him to be shifted into foster care and a life of poverty, while Georges went on to become a wealthy television personality. Georges never acknowledges his own role in Majid's life taking the unfortunate turn that it did, despite the periodic reminders. The social and political commentary in *Caché* is overt; the mystery at the core of the film — as well as Georges and Majid's relationship — serves as a microcosm of how Parisians have failed to properly acknowledge the infamous massacre, and instead chose to sweep the dreadful event under the rug for decades.

Caché also serves as an exploration of the nature of watching, playing into Haneke's intensive interest in modes of presentation in filmmaking. The film opens with a static long shot of a neighborhood street with parked cars, houses, and pedestrians occasionally moving through the frame, with a gated home as the central focus. The sounds of chirping birds and bustling city activity permeate the scene. The shot takes on a surveillance camera-like association. The opening credits appear along the screen, as the seeming nothingness of the image continues for several minutes. A voiceover of two people questioning the location of where a camera may be is heard. There is then a cut to another wide-angle shot

of the same street. Georges walks out into it, and looks for where a camera might be placed or hidden. Then there is a cut back to the first shot, and the image starts to rewind, revealing that it is on a television monitor. It becomes clear the opening shot of the film is a videotape recording being watched by the characters on their own television that is shown fully in the frame. This reveal makes sense, due to the fact that the image looked just like a surveillance camera, but as the film continues, many shots are framed and presented in this way. A few shots are even revealed to be hidden-camera recordings very much like in the opening scene. This makes it extremely difficult to ever fully distinguish videotape images from the film itself.

In his book *Michael Haneke: The Intermedial Void*, in which he analyzes Haneke's work from the perspective of how forms of media are used and represented within his films, Christopher Rowe argues that *Caché* blends the videotape footage with shots in the film for a distinct purpose. Using *Caché* as an example, Rowe states that the videotapes in the film

> …are 'impossible objects' that present a logical and representational paradox, as they destabilize the categories of reality and representation with respect to both the situations of the characters within the film and the situation of the viewing audience.[20]

One of the main ideas that Rowe addresses about Haneke's use of media is how our consumption of it and engagement with it relates to the world outside of it. By

[20] Rowe, Christopher. Ch. 5, p.1

undermining the film's constructed reality, Haneke invites audiences to consider the artifice of cinema.

Funny Games U.S.

In 2007, Haneke remade his 1997 film *Funny Games*, this time specifically for an American audience. This remake is an exact replica of the original film — shot for shot — down to the last seconds. When asked by Stuart Jeffries of *The Guardian* why he had remade the film in Hollywood (something that Haneke said he would never do) Haneke said,

> The first film didn't reach the public I think really ought to see this film… So I decided to make it again... The original was in German, and English-speaking audiences don't often see subtitled films. When I first envisioned *Funny Games* in the mid-1990s, it was my intention to have an American audience watch the movie. It is a reaction to a certain American cinema, its violence, its naivety, the way American cinema toys with human beings. In many American films, violence is made consumable. But because I made *Funny Games* in German with actors not familiar to US audiences, it didn't get through to the people who most needed to see it.[21]

Funny Games is thus an exception within Haneke's career, in that its purpose is specific enough that an American remake was deemed necessary in his eyes. The film serves as a prime example of how Haneke's work creates the "ethical reflexivity" that Wheatley discusses.[22] It establishes itself early on as a home invasion-torture thriller in a similar vein to Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) or Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), but it deliberately subverts many of the expectations of this sub-genre. It subverts these expectations in service of

[21] "Stuart Jeffries Talks to Director Michael Haneke."
[22] Wheatley. pp. 3-5

confronting horror audiences' desire to be entertained by watching suffering — no matter how depraved — and forces them to consider the implications of depicting violence on screen. The film centers around the Farber family: George, Ann, and their son Georgie at their peaceful lake house. Their home is breached by two men who force them to play a series of sadistic games for the chance to live through the night.

Paul and Peter, the two men that have invaded the house, do not do so in a forceful and aggressive manner like so many home invasion villains do. Instead, they are mostly courteous and aggravatingly polite, acting as though they are also members of the affluent society George and Ann are a part of. In fact, they use this to take advantage of the Farbers' desire to be friendly. The fact that the young men attempt to terrorize the Farbers using politeness, a behavior often associated with refined high society, speaks to Haneke's sensibilities yet again. His view that the upper class is experiencing a social rupture manifests itself in the veneer of politeness masking the horrifying reality of these two young men.

While these inklings of Haneke's philosophy are present in *Funny Games*, it is not the primary goal of the film. As Haneke previously stated, his main concern is to critique how violence is commonly depicted — as well as mindlessly consumed — in American cinema. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that it is not truly a horror movie in any traditional sense. None of the violence in the film takes place on screen, and the optimistic suspense that normally permeates a film

of that genre is squashed whenever possible in favor of a pervasive and stark nihilism. At a few key points in the film, the character Paul breaks the fourth wall to address the audience directly. One moment he encourages the viewer to bet against him that the family will not survive until the next morning. In another instance he taunts the audience, acknowledging that he cannot kill the family yet because "[the audience wants] a real ending with plausible plot development."[23]

In a scene toward the film's end, the two men have shot and killed Georgie, and George and Ann are the only two Farbers left. George is so drained that he can barely do anything but lay there. Paul explains to Ann what the next game will be in a medium close-up. She is told that she must say a prayer backwards in order to be able to pick the murder weapon used next. She will also be able to pick the next victim that the chosen weapon is used on. As Paul is distracted explaining this, the film cuts to a medium close-up of Ann, tired and disheveled. She has a look of deep thought on her face. Ann then lunges forward for the shotgun the men had used to kill her son, and there is a quick cut to an overhead medium shot of the shotgun that Ann grabs. Ann then pulls the trigger and shoots Peter, physically blasting him across the room and up against the wall. Blood spatters on the wall as Peter collides with it and slides down it, evidently dead. There is then a cut to a medium close-up of Paul, his face streaked with Peter's blood, as he screams "Look out!" seconds too late.[24] The following medium shot shows a lifeless Peter

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[23] Haneke, Michael, director. *Funny Games*.
[24] Ibid.

sliding the rest of the way down the wall, cutting to a close-up of his head hitting the floor. The close-up on Peter's dead face lingers for a moment, and then there is a cut back to the medium close-up of Paul, as the shock of what has just happened seems to sink in.

This is the moment in any ordinary thriller when the tables are turned, and the protagonists can finally begin to escape from the evil-doers. But Haneke has other plans for *Funny Games*. After taking a moment to recover, Paul immediately grabs the gun and hits Ann with it in the same medium close-up. In a wide-angle shot of the Farber's living room, Paul then throws Ann back onto the couch, and begins frantically looking around the room, saying aloud "Where is that fucking remote control?"[25] He then pulls out the controller, and in an overhead medium close-up of the device in his hand, he presses the rewind button. Subsequently, the full-screen image of the movie itself begins to rewind to a point before Ann had the chance to grab the weapon, and Paul smugly snatches it and uses it to kill George. The film ends with Ann's death, and the disquieting implication that the violent cycle will continue with yet another unsuspecting wealthy family. With *Funny Games*, Haneke essentially created a thriller, but without the core materials that make them conventionally entertaining. Hope is unsustainable for the Farber family, and there is no gratuitous violence shown, leaving no room for superficial excitement. In crafting the film in this way, Haneke compels the viewer to consider

[25] Ibid

what he sees as a perverse enjoyment of screen violence, and the effects of consuming the genre that permeates American film culture.

The White Ribbon

The White Ribbon, Haneke's next film, won the Palme D'or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009. This is one of Haneke's most complex and narratively rich explorations of the themes and attitudes that define his career. Taking place in a small village in northern Germany on the eve of World War I, the film chronicles a series of strange and violent accidents that continue to happen in the village that revolve around a group of children. The story of the film is told from the point of view of an elderly tailor who remains nameless, as he recounts the events from his memory. The film opens with the tailor letting the audience know that what they are seeing may not be entirely true due to his own subjectivity. The film was shot in black-and-white, aiding in creating the feeling that what is being shown is memory.

The mysterious accidents begin with a thin wire being placed in front of the town doctor's house. When his horse trips over it and he is badly injured, he must leave town to get medical attention. Later, some rotten floorboards give way in the sawmill, killing the wife of one of the Baron's farmers — and then on the day of the village's harvest festival, the Baron's son disappears, and is later found tied up inside the sawmill having been violently caned. Next, a mentally handicapped boy in the town goes missing and is found tied up in the forest, almost blinded by

severe and inexplicable beatings. After a search, the townspeople also find a note quoting *Exodus* (20:5) near where the boy was found. The passage speaks of punishing the descending generations for the sins of their ancestors, as they have fallen from the grace of God. The pastor's barn is also set aflame one night, seemingly without reason, and his bird is found dead on his desk, with a pair of scissors through its head.

At the heart of these violent acts are the village children. While they are never explicitly shown committing any of the violent, or even mischievous acts, they are seen leaving town close to the times of many of these events. The pastor's daughter is even shown to be holding his bird with the pair of scissors shortly before it is found dead, although she is never shown inflicting any harm to the creature. The steward's daughter tells the tailor that she had a "premonition" that something bad would happen to the handicapped boy, but said and did nothing about it. Her reaction makes her appear as if she feels guilty. The scene implies that this was the girl's way of confessing without admitting guilt, but it does not deliver any concrete answers as to whether this was the intention. The handicapped boy's mother, a midwife, claims that her son told her who attacked him, and rides into town to report it, but she is never seen again. Coincidentally, the doctor and his children also disappear, leaving nothing but a note behind stating that his practice has been shut down. What is shown is set up to be a

mystery, but answers are never revealed. What is shown instead is the hypocrisy, abuse, and repression that imbues the puritanical German village.

The pastor, baron and doctor are the ones who seem to be in control of nearly every aspect of town life, and each presents his own issues. For the small transgression of not coming home directly after school, the pastor forces his young children to wear a white ribbon as a reminder of their innocence and purity and as a way to make them feel guilty for their tardiness. He forces his adolescent son to admit to masturbation, and then ties his hands to his bed frame each night as a corrective punishment. The doctor treats the children well on the surface, but as the film progresses, it is revealed that he is also a depraved human being. He uses his housekeeper, the local midwife, for sex, and then abusively humiliates her afterwards. Additionally, he sexually abuses his teenage daughter, who reminds him of his deceased wife. The baron, who is the lord of the manor, fails to properly finance his workers during the harvest festival, resulting in one of his farmer's sons — the son of the woman who died in the sawmill — destroying the baron's cabbage field, a sign of disrespect. After the farmer hangs himself, the family is forgiven for the son's unexplained actions.

The quiet dysfunction of these characters and the world they inhabit discloses Haneke's themes. The wealthy and powerful in the village abuse and misuse their power to detrimental effects, yet refuse to admit any wrongdoing on their own parts. The fact that the film ends at the official start of World War I may

signify that the disaffected young children who are forced to blindly follow tyrannical orders that they don't understand, will become the generation of Germans who usher fascism into Germany in the 1930s. While all of these elements feel connected, exactly how they relate remains unexplained, and they are not elaborated on. *The White Ribbon* substantiates Haneke's view that social and cultural disconnection and lack of perspective are not only contemporary issues, but ones that have existed in societies for centuries.

Amour

Three years after *The White Ribbon*, Haneke released another Palme D'or winner at Cannes: *Amour*. While retaining many of the philosophical and formal qualities of his past work, *Amour* also indicates that Haneke is departing from much of his class and spectatorship critiques in order to make a film that feels more interested in the human condition than anything he has made before. Focusing on Georges and Anne, a married Parisian couple in their twilight years, the film follows Georges as he takes care of Anne during her last days. Unlike in Haneke's previous works, a primary goal of this film is for the audience to empathize with these two elderly characters. The film opens with a flash-forward of the police entering the couples' apartment to find Anne dead in their marital bed. An exception is made of Haneke's usual aversion to nonlinear storytelling and clear answers so that the audience cannot be capable of guessing the outcome of the scenario. Where Haneke usually encourages the viewer to think more deeply

about the components that he is setting up throughout the film, here he mostly asks them to experience events as Georges does.

This is not to say that *Amour* is lacking in ambiguity, confrontation, or ideological complexity. This film sees Haneke's concerns being brought toward a more metaphysical place. *Amour* raises important questions of love, loyalty, life after death, and the possible meaning of life. In knowing where the story will eventually lead, Haneke invites his viewers to see how every fear, hope, and desire of these two characters is ultimately meaningless in the face of time; they don't have long left to live, and their unanswered questions about life and the world will remain unanswered. In chronicling this perspective in the story, audiences will likely be faced with hosting the same thoughts in their own minds.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the film's ending. In a static wide-angle shot of Anne's bedside, Georges tells her a story from his childhood to relax her as she moans in pain. Once she has become calm, he smothers her with a pillow. Despite how awful the action itself appears to be, Georges feels that it is lovingly necessary to alleviate her suffering, and to give her what she wants at that point, which is death. After Georges remakes Anne's bed and leaves his last notes behind, he lays in the other, smaller bed that he sleeps in. In another static wide-angle shot, we see Georges laying there, as the sound of dishes being washed echoes from the kitchen. Curious, Georges looks over to the door, and slowly tries to stand, falling back down once before rising. The camera tilts

upwards to follow him out of the room and into the kitchen, and a look of familiarity washes over his face. There is a cut to a wide-angle shot of Anne washing the dishes in the sink. She tells him that she is almost finished and that he should put on his shoes and get ready to leave. The camera then pans left and follows Georges to the door as he puts his shoes on. Anne then crosses into the frame to turn off the lights in the apartment. Georges then helps her put on her coat, and begins to leave, only to realize that he has forgotten his. As he turns around to grab it, Anne exits the frame. Georges quickly follows her, closing the apartment door behind him. The camera lingers on the empty apartment for a second longer, and the scene ends.

The next and final scene begins with Eva, Georges and Anne's daughter, entering their empty apartment in a wide-angle shot of their living room. She walks through the empty space looking around. She then walks into their study in a new wide-angle shot. The camera then pans left to follow Eva to her father's chair as she sits down. Cutting back to the foyer, the film ends on a wide-angle shot of Eva sitting alone, with the apartment feeling more vacant than it has for the entire duration of the film.

Haneke's choice to end the film this way is deliberately ambiguous, and directly ties into the themes of *Amour*. The ending could be representative of Georges' death and a "reuniting" with Anne, but it could just as easily have been a dream or fantasy that Georges is having, or even a simple memory. All of these

options, and possibly more, are given equal credibility due to Haneke's restraint. The questions of where Georges is, as well as the existential concerns of the film, are also heightened by ending the film in this way. The potential for varying interpretations just adds more fuel to the fire for audiences to consider the questions raised in the film.

Happy End

Happy End (2017), Haneke's latest film, is one of the his most interesting works, as it recontextualizes many of his common themes in a contemporary context. Focusing on a wealthy French family who runs a construction business on the island of Calais, the film demonstrates how the trademark critique of violence, desensitization, and lack of awareness that plagues Haneke's oeuvre, manifests itself in the internet age. The film shifts perspectives to different family members, but much of the focus is on 13-year-old Eve, the niece and cousin of the primary family in Calais. Much as in *The White Ribbon*, Haneke uses the perspective of a child to demonstrate the effect that the social and political climate in the world is having on the larger population.

The film opens with a static shot from the point of view of a smartphone camera. This is clear not only because the camera footage is shot vertically, but because in the top and bottom of the screen are icons that are commonly seen in photography and video streaming applications like a “switch camera” and “emoji” icons. The camera is focused on a woman down the hall as she brushes her teeth

in the bathroom. She is going through her nightly routine before bed. The rest of the house is dark, and it appears that the woman in the frame does not realize that she is being filmed. To further illustrate the fact that the person filming is using a smartphone, text bubbles appear on screen that explain what she is doing. “Spit, water, gargle, spit, rinse, towel, hair, put brush away, put on cream, check yourself, piss, flush, and we’re done. Lights out.”[26]

The next shot is from the same smartphone point of view of a hamster in its cage. The person filming explains that the hamster is her pet. The text bubble on screen then adds “I just spiked his food with pills that mom takes for her depression. Let’s see what happens.”[27] Text then elaborates that the person filming is sick of her mother, and her constant whining. As the hamster begins to eat the food, she explains that her father left a number of years ago because he could not handle her mother, and feels like all of her mother’s troubles have become her responsibility. Eventually, the hamster stops moving, and a ruler enters the frame to poke it. After some nudging, the hamster falls onto its side, completely stiff. “There,” the speech bubble says, “looks like it’s working.”[28]

The following shot, again from the smartphone, looks down on the woman from the first shot while she cuts vegetables at her kitchen table. The text bubbles elaborate on the frustration the one filming feels, explaining that her mother ignores her, and how “it’s always about her.” They explain that they tried talking to

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[26] Haneke, Michael, director. *Happy End*. *Amazon Video*.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

their mother about it, but her response was “idk (I don’t know) what u want.”[29] The mother then takes the cutting board to the countertop, almost dropping it, and continues preparing the meal.

The final image of the opening is still from the smartphone perspective. The camera is filming the mother character from another room, as she lays on her couch. She appears to be asleep. “It’s way too easy to shut someone up” says the text bubble. The one filming then says she will call an ambulance, making it clear that the mother is not just sleeping. The final bubble of text before the film cuts to its title card, and leaves the smartphone perspective, reads “She’s not the dumbass know-it-all anymore.”[30]

It is later revealed that the person filming is Eve. Through the way Haneke presents this opening, her disconnection is clear right away. Naturally, Eve is dealing with problems at home that are taking a toll on her. Her reliance on technology is not the only thing causing her trouble. However, Haneke’s choice to frame the cold and violent acts through the smartphone camera communicates the role that social media plays in the film. Eve views the world through her smartphone like a filter, in just the same way that Haneke’s previous characters see the world through the lense of the media that they presumably consume. Through opening the film in this way, Haneke is able to contextualize his focus on the desensitizing effects of consuming media from a contemporary perspective.

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

Influence

The influence of Michael Haneke has become notable in the zeitgeist of contemporary European art cinema, especially over the last twenty years. Many of the most critically acclaimed films and filmmakers working today in world cinema owe clear debts to Haneke — be it Lucrecia Martel's clinical portrait of the detachment of the Argentinian bourgeoise in *The Headless Woman* (2008) or Ruben Östlund's *Force Majeure* (2014), a film that also focuses on an upper class European family and their inability to properly communicate with one another. Östlund has also found success at the Cannes Film Festival similar to Haneke when it comes to his general style and sensibility, receiving many accolades, including the Palme D'or for his 2017 film *The Square*.

Similar to Östlund, Greek auteur Yorgos Lanthimos has also adopted a cold, detached, and almost observational style that he uses to comment on things like class disparity, social isolation, and the media's effect on consumers in a similar way to Haneke. His 2009 film *Dogtooth* is specifically reminiscent of Haneke in both formal and thematic senses. Focusing on parents who have indoctrinated their adult children into believing that the outside world is highly dangerous, the film chronicles their social disconnection and the violence that manifests due to the authoritarian nature of their upbringing. Good behavior, listening to their father, is rewarded lightly, while bad behavior, not listening to their father, results in punitive violence. Throughout the film, we are shown how this life

desensitizes the children, as they play “games” to stay entertained that involve inflicting pain on themselves, like putting their fingers into boiling water. Their father pays a woman from his place of work to have passionless sex with his post-pubescent son, in order to satiate his repressed sexual urges. There is even a scene where one of the daughters falls into the possession of DVDs of Hollywood movies and begins to mindlessly imitate and reenact scenes from them. These scenes are generally presented in single-takes with a static camera, and use entirely diegetic sound — much like Haneke would present a scene — for the purpose of creating an understated construction of reality that allows the images onscreen to tell the story.

Criticism

For all of the praise and acclaim that Haneke has garnered, he has also experienced his fair share of detractors. Many critics have argued that his cinema is tedious, pointless, and even contradictory. In a piece that she wrote for The Washington *Post*, entitled “At Cannes, auteurs are worshiped, for better and, too often, for worse,” critic Ann Hornaday called *Happy End* “patronizing,” and “more of the same from the Austrian filmmaker, whose sadistic misanthropy is approaching shtick at this point.”[31] Peter Keough called Haneke’s filmmaking “beautifully photographed, well composed, but disappointingly superficial” in his review for The Boston *Globe*, stating that the filmmaker “belabors themes dealt

[31] “At Cannes, Auteurs Are Worshiped, for Better and, Too Often, for Worse.”

with before, and with more intensity and conviction."[32] In his review of *The White Ribbon* for *New York* Magazine, film critic David Edelstein wrote about more than just the film, criticizing Haneke's overall outlook, viewing his films as a substanceless exercise in bitterness. He claims that "Haneke's contempt for humanity had congealed into dogma before he shot his first frame of film."[33]

Ben McCann and David Sorfa, in their book *The Cinema of Michael Haneke: Europe Utopia*, have reservations with some of his thematic concerns, specifically in regards to how viewers are manipulated by cinema. They scrutinize the notion that Haneke's cinema can effectively challenge the audience to consider how a film is presented. The writers point out that Haneke's philosophy on presentation can potentially be empty. According to Haneke, a viewer of cinema is helpless to be influenced by what they see in a film, but McCann and Sorfa point out that if this is the case, then media itself is dangerous, and cannot be trusted. McCann and Sorfa write:

> Spectators are almost mindlessly influenced by the media they consume and it is perhaps here that there is a weakness and Haneke's analysis of the almost entirely passive spectator. It is difficult… to imagine what Haneke wishes for us to do – other than to renounce cinema in its entirety.[34]

The majority of criticisms of Haneke's work seem to articulate the same points: that his messages are all too obvious. They say that his films feel more like banal exercises than meaningful works of art or that they are overly cynical in a

[32] "An Unhappy Family Gets Little Love in 'Happy End' - The Boston Globe."
[33] "David Edelstein on 'Sherlock Holmes,' 'The White Ribbon,' and 'Avatar' -- New York Magazine Movie Review - Nymag."
[34] McCann and Sorfa. p. 4.

way that becomes dishonest in its negativity. In some circumstances, these criticisms are understandable. A film like *Code Unknown* for example, while formally complex, demonstrates that the French bourgeoisie do not care to understand the social issues surrounding them. Scene after scene of societal disconnection drive that point home, but ultimately fails to add to the criticism after the film's first hour.

To claim that Haneke's cinema is overly cynical or obvious in his commentary is to look for meaning in his work in the wrong places. The depressing nature of his subjects and his rigorously numbing style play a role in the true effect of Haneke's work. With regard to the obviousness of the class criticisms in his work, Haneke's statement that the "essence of true drama" is in creating situations where the viewers are responsible for forming a personal connection comes to mind.[35] Haneke is not necessarily attempting to comment on any overtly political issues in his work, but rather to give the audience provocative material to consider, so that they themselves can decide what courses of action they may take in their own lives to avoid these same problems for themselves. Haneke's films elicit a strong negative reaction in some circles, but this may prompt those who are affected by the work to engage further with the topics he addresses. While it is understandable to dislike cinema with the goal of upsetting its viewer, it can be necessary in art that addresses serious topics honestly. In

[35] Haneke, Michael. The Criterion Collection.

Haneke's case, he is not trying to upset anyone for the sake of it, but to give his viewers the tools to think about issues for themselves.

Some of the most scathing, but also the most thought-provoking, criticisms of Haneke's work come from cultural critic Richard Brody. For *The New Yorker* website, Brody wrote a piece in 2017 entitled "'The Square,' 'Killing of a Sacred Deer,' and the Unfortunate Influence of Michael Haneke," in which he discusses what were then the latest films from Östlund and Lanthimos in conjunction with Haneke's work.[36] Brody criticizes what he sees as filmmakers of their kind claiming a true objectivity in what they show, and choosing to take a moral high ground without actually adding to the debate themselves. He claims that they are "[rubbing] others in their filth while keeping their own hands rigorously pristine."[37] He also criticizes their overall presentation choices, stating

> [their aesthetics present], so to speak, just the facts, as if the facts themselves weren't deeply layered with living history and crisscrossed with vectors of divergent ideas and ideals… Haneke, Östlund, and Lanthimos aren't encouraged to create new systems of production, new processes of filmmaking, but merely to slot their own content, their own emotions and ideas, into the structures—administrative and narrative—that exist.[38]

To claim that Haneke believes he has created a truly objective cinema, while understandably frustrating, is a reductive way to look at his oeuvre. While these criticisms make sense in the context in which they are discussed, they are not inarguable. Haneke has not claimed that his films reveal "just the facts." In

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[36] "'The Square," 'Killing of a Sacred Deer," and the Unfortunate Influence of Michael Haneke."
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

reality, sometimes he doesn't even provide those. According to actress Juliette Binoche, on the set of *Caché,* she asked the filmmaker if her character's alleged affair in the script was real or not, so that when her character denied it in the film in two specific scenes, she could give a convincing performance. Haneke's response was to tell her to play it in one scene as though she was lying, and in the other as though she was telling the truth.[39] The point of Haneke's films is not to lay the facts bare for the audience or to attempt objectivity. The point is to make the film's viewer aware of the complexities of reality, and that even when we have a thoughtful perspective, to truly understand everything is still an unattainable goal. While on the surface it may seem as though Haneke is being "holier than thou" in his approach, his way of telling a story is very unpretentious. He fully admits to not knowing the solutions and instead of overplaying his hand, he raises the questions to the audience, turning what could easily be heavy-handed moralizing into an open dialogue.

Conclusion

Michael Haneke is a singular filmmaker. His unique approach to cinematic realism and his penchant for challenging audiences — not to mention his influence on the landscape of international arthouse cinema — make him a valuable filmmaker in the contemporary discourse. His work is purposefully confrontational, Haneke does not seek to shock or provoke viewers simply out of spite or malice,

[39] "Words of Love From a Severe Director"

but out of his genuine desire to encourage filmgoers to look at cinema differently. His films invite audiences to leave behind the mentalities that they habitually use in approaching films. Instead, he opts for a more critical, thoughtful approach. In doing this, Haneke hopes not only to encourage deeper thinking about cinema, but also to stimulate deeper responses to the surrounding world. The unconventionality of his work exists in service of more than just the cinematic form, and raises significant questions about the problems in First-World societies at large, touching upon issues of racism, sexism, the growing desensitization to the prevalence of violence, of people's isolation, and their inability to properly communicate with one another. The ambiguity with which he approaches these lofty topics creates a cinema that is designed to broaden perspectives, challenge active minds and, most importantly, push those who are willing to understand things in a new way towards profound insight and an appreciation of what films can initiate.

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