

On Making Sense of Michael Haneke's Films—And Things in General

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The past couple of weeks, I had an enjoyable and educative experience with the films of Austrian film director Michael Haneke. Haneke (born 1942) writes as well as directs his films, which are known for dealing with bleak and disturbing, including shockingly violent, subject matter. He has been prominent for the last fifteen years and has made German and French language films and one in English during that time. Prior to this period, he was a film critic, directed for the stage, and made films for German and Austrian television. He teaches directing at the Filmacademy Vienna and brings a pedantic bent to his filmmaking: he has something he wants to teach his audience, or perhaps better, bring to its attention. His mature, artful, complex, oblique, informed, and thought provoking films have attracted the interest of serious filmgoers and scholars from around the world.

No currently active director's films intrigue me as much as Haneke's. I've seen just about all of them available in America over in the past decade. Learning that his last film, *Amour*, won the top prize at the prestigious Cannes film festival (as did the one before that) prompted me to take the time to engage his films more intensely than I had when I initially viewed them. I decided I would watch his films again, or many of them anyway, more carefully than before, and then immediately after I watched one I'd read what film scholars had to say about that particular film. I'd do that a film at a time for however long it took to get through them. And that's what I've done.

I obtained three scholarly books on Haneke's films:

- Oliver C. Speck, *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke* (Continuum, 2010).
- Alexander D. Ornella and Stephanie Knauss, editors, *Fascinatingly Disturbing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Michael Haneke's Cinema* (Pickwick, 2010).
- Ben McCann and David Sorfa, editors, *The Cinema of Michael Haneke: Europa Utopia* (Wallflower, 2012).

I checked out the Speck and Ornella and Knauss books at the university library where I teach; the McCann and Sorfa book was a Kindle purchase. All three contain analyses of Haneke's oeuvre by university faculty specializing in film study. Speck was born in Germany and is a professor of film at an American University. The other two books are edited volumes made up of ten or so papers by European and American academics. Check Amazon for other books on Haneke.

I used Netflix and my local video store to get DVDs of Haneke's films:

- *The Seventh Continent* (1989)
- *Benny's Video* (1992)
- *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994)
- *Funny Games* (1997)
- *Code Unknown* (2000)
- *The Piano Teacher* (2001)
(*The Piano Teacher* won what amounts to second prize at Cannes.)
- *Cache* (2005)
(Haneke won best director at Cannes for *Cache*.)
- *The White Ribbon* (2009)
(*The White Ribbon* also won the top prize at Cannes and the Golden Globes award for best foreign film.)

I didn't view the films in chronological order. Rather, I asked myself, "Which one do I want to watch tonight?" and went with that. Most of the DVDs had features that included an interview with Haneke and I watched those. Immediately after watching a film I used the indexes and paged through the books to find material on that film. I'd compare what these film scholars had to offer with what had come up for me, and used these writings to take my explorations deeper. I really got caught up in this activity. Big omissions in my viewing: Haneke's 2008 shot-for-shot American language re-make of *Funny Games*—I just wasn't interested; and I couldn't get into *Code Unknown* and quit on it after about twenty minutes. *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, *The Piano Teacher*, and *Cache* were the ones that got me thinking the most; I keep going back to those three in my mind.

I was taken by how new these films seemed even though I'd at least nominally seen them before, and how much richer, deeper, and more enjoyable and informative and thought provoking it was this time. Art involves an exchange between a work of art and the consumer of it as he or she is at that point in time, and I'm different, better, now than I was at the times of my first encounters with the films, more sensitive and perceptive, and I brought a commitment this time to *really*, not just merely, take in these films. Plus, the scholarly writings helped deepen my experience.

The question for me is what do I want to talk about here with regard to this Haneke activity. I've decided that I don't want to get into what Haneke is about but rather what people making sense of Haneke are about. I want to discuss the capabilities and qualities someone needs to bring to a study of Haneke to do it justice, or broader, to any artist or philosopher or social analyst, or really, anybody or anything worth taking seriously. What tools of the trade, call them, should you and I, anybody, bring to a study of just about anything?

Two tools of the trade that came to mind prompted by the Haneke weeks:

1. *We need to focus on metacognition.* By metacognition I mean thinking about our own thinking. What is it, we need to ask ourselves, that we most fundamentally assume to be true and value? What constructs and theories do we bring to bear on our attempts to understand things and put them in perspective, and where did they come from? What do we really care about knowing and why? With Haneke, for example, is it his ideas that matter to us, or is it his merits as an artist and the way he creates the aesthetic experience for an audience that he does? So the question isn't, in this case, Who is Haneke? but rather, Who are we? and How did we get this way? Who we are strongly influences whom we decide Haneke is and what that implies for ourselves and the world.

Many of the writers I read after the Haneke films perceived his work predominantly through the lens of neo-Marxist theory, which includes a Freudian element—Theodor Adorno's name came up a lot—or through the formulations of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1975) or film theorist André Bazin (1918-1958). They also seemed to run with comments Haneke has made about the themes he deals with in his films: including the alienating and

desensitizing effects of the mass media, particularly television; authoritarian, controlling early family experiences and their outcomes; and individual and collective guilt. In the main, these scholars seemed to me much more oriented toward social science than art: they focused on sociological and psychological concerns and ideology and politics rather than aesthetics. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, but I did wonder as I read them whether these individuals had thought hard enough about their own presumptions and predilections and its consequences for their scholarship.

It's necessary for all of us to rigorously think about the strengths and weaknesses and implications of whatever we believe to be true and right. Included in that is coming to a clear understanding of the strongest arguments *in opposition* to our outlook and approach. And it includes attaining a firm grasp of the best cases to be made for *alternative perspectives* to the ones to which we ascribe. It means realizing that because someone authoritatively contends and asserts something—Haneke or Adorno or Deleuze or Bazin or anyone else—doesn't necessarily make it so; we have to critically assess everybody and every claim. And because our colleagues agree on something doesn't make it so either. I thought I was picking up a fair amount of groupthink in the scholars' writings on Haneke.

All to say, we need make sense of ourselves in order to make sense of the world.

2. *We need to perceive reality objectively.* What is, is, and we need to use our senses to comprehend that "is-ness." With the Haneke films, that means getting beyond our concepts and theories and personal agendas and taking in, unfiltered, uncontaminated, unaltered, freshly and new, what is actually happening on the screen. Frequently over these past couple weeks, what the scholars said occurred in the film didn't square with what I had seen just a few minutes before; things didn't happen that way in the film or in that order. I was left with impression that a closer connection with the films themselves, taking in what is actually there, letting the films themselves reveal what they are about, would have revealed angles and insights not surfaced by looking at them through the intellectual lenses the scholars brought to their examinations.

Perhaps something I wrote in a writing for this site called *A Needed Paradigm Shift in Education* will be helpful here:

Two Buddhism-derived commitments will be helpful in this exploration. The first is a commitment to right awareness: being fully awake, present, alert, here, now, in this moment. The second is a commitment to right understanding: seeing and perceiving things as they really are, rather than what you assume they are, or have been told they are, or wish they were, or think they ought to be; or in the way you believe you are obligated to perceive them; or in the way that makes you think more highly of yourself; or in the way that serves your own needs, wants, and interests.

Right awareness and understanding are about freedom of the mind. They are about setting aside doctrine and formula and conventional wisdom. They are about going beyond theories and slogans and numbers and other abstractions to concrete reality. They are about examining the world carefully, with new eyes, scrutinizing it, testing every idea and contention, and knowing rather than assuming and believing and hoping. They are about seeing, really seeing. They are about becoming fully alive to the moment.

Concepts and theories, and notions about what is preferable, are mental constructs, they exist only in our heads, and, indeed, they can be very helpful; we shouldn't disparage them or set them aside; we should be diligent about creating and employing them as means of understanding ourselves and the world and deciding what to do. At the same time, however, we need to keep in mind that these abstractions are not the concrete realities they refer to. Reality is reality, not what we think it is or want it to be.

Anyway, the Haneke project was a good time for me and if you like film and are of the sort that enjoys and profits from this kind of endeavor I recommend it to you. Of course, you could do something similar with another filmmaker. Here are some contemporary possibilities:

Woody Allen
Chantal Akerman
Pedro Almodóvar
Paul Thomas Anderson
Wes Anderson
Darren Aronofsky

Joel and Ethan Coen
Francis Ford Coppola
Sophia Coppola
David Cronenberg
Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne
Guillermo Del Toro
Claire Denis
Bruno Dumont
Clint Eastwood
David Fincher
Jean-Luc Godard
Werner Herzog
Hou Hsiao-Hsien
Jim Jarmusch
Abbas Kiarostami
Patrice Leconte
David Lynch
Terrance Malick
Hayao Miyazaki
Christopher Nolan
Alexander Payne
Martin Scorsese
Ridley Scott
Steven Soderbergh
Steven Spielberg
Quentin Tarantino
Lars von Trier
Gus Van Zant
Agnes Varda
Wong Kar-wai
Zhang Yimou

You could also tap the history of film—John Ford, Ingmar Berman, Federico Fellini, Alfred Hitchcock, Yasujiro Ozu, the list goes on and on. If you do anything like this and something good comes out of it, feel invited to email me and let me know.