

BOMB

Michael Haneke

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Michael Hanneke

LAWRENCE CHUA

AFTER SEEING MY FIRST Michael Haneke film, I left the theater sick to my stomach. Perhaps this is not the most obvious compliment to pay a director, but there is a visceral effect to Haneke's work that I would be remiss in not sharing. In that film, *Benny's Video*, a teenage boy becomes obsessed with video and with the violent imagery that it can record. One day he meets a young girl and they flirt, but then he kills her and tapes it. His parents must decide how to deal with the dead girl in the closet and with their son, who is disconnected from any moral sense of reality. The audience watching all of this has decisions to make as well. In Haneke's films, the viewer is implicated in the horrors that unfold on the screen; there is nowhere to run, not even after the film has stopped.

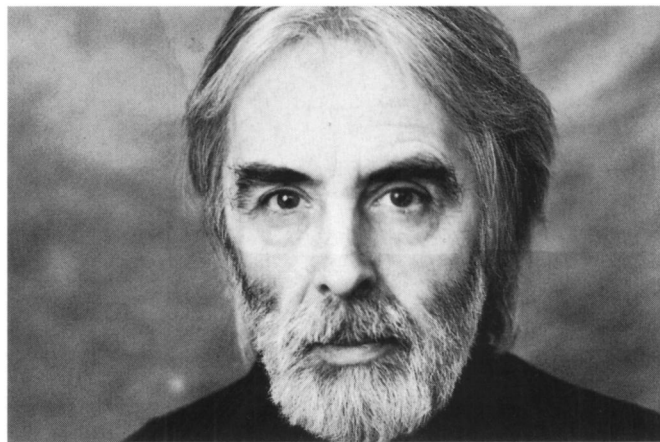
Haneke was born in Munich three years before the end of World War II. He studied philosophy, psychology and theater in Vienna, and in the late sixties began working as a playwright with the German television station Südwestfunk. He eventually moved to freelance directing and screenwriting and in 1989 made his feature film debut with *The Seventh Continent* (1989). His subsequent films include the aforementioned *Benny's Video* (1992), *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994), *Funny Games* (1997), and *Code Unknown* (2000), a mas-

terful interrogation of racism and the dynamics of hate. Watching Haneke's latest film, *The Piano Teacher* (2002), one becomes acutely aware of the way audiences react to a blow job in a theater: biting their nails, hands resting on their chins, their eyes lit up and peering through the dust drifting in the projector's beam. Based on Elfriede

Jelinek's novel of the same name, the film tells the story of a Viennese piano teacher (Isabelle Huppert) who realizes her self-destructive fantasies in an affair with one of her pupils (Benoît Magimel). Huppert's Erika Kohut is a woman who haunts peep shows and masturbates with razor blades, a

woman who is not allowed to experience, but only to watch, and who exists in a world that no longer knows how to love or to hate.

Haneke's narratives point toward a consumer-driven culture with a naive understanding of violence, a lack of respect for its dangerous, transformative power. In a society where basic relationships between people are mediated by images, reality has lost its realness. Haneke reminds us of this by pulling us into the trick of the spectacle and then exposing the trick itself. He reveals not only how it has seduced us, but in what ways we've been complicit in the seduction. In sharpening our responses to the world around us, he gives us a piece of truth, even as he deprives us of peace of mind.



Michael Haneke. All images courtesy of Wang and Gluck.

lawrence chua You said you wanted to film Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* after you first read it. That was 15 years ago. What was your emotional attachment to the novel?

michael haneke When I read the novel, I was working in theater and television, but I thought that if I ever made a movie, it would make for a beautiful one. The depth of the characters and the description of the psychology attracted me to it. These make

for interesting parts for good actors. However, I'm not that interested in sado-masochism. I have a little suspicion that that's what is underneath your question.

lc (laughter) Maybe.

mh But unfortunately that's not the case.

lc You've said the novel and the film have different structures and different tones. But there is something of Jelinek's novel that you

have preserved in the film. It's this curious feeling of being both inside and outside of a character. At one point Erika says she won't allow her feelings to defeat her intelligence, and yet we see both these things.

mh It's a difficult question. The structure of a novel is always different from the structure of a screenplay. For example, in the novel, maybe about a third of it is flashbacks from Erika's youth. If you do that in a movie, the flashbacks immediately become an explana-

Isabelle Huppert as Erika Kohut in *The Piano Teacher*, 2001.



Isabelle Huppert and Benoît Magimel in *The Piano Teacher*, 2002.

tion for her behavior. I wanted to avoid that. So, for example, I created two characters, the young pianist student of Erika's and the student's mother. They suggest something of Erika's youth without being an explanation. Naturally, there are a lot of changes from the novel to the screenplay. The concert at the end of the film and the rehearsal in the concert hall don't exist in the novel. That scene was written in to gather all the movie's characters together in one scene. The reason for this change is that the dramaturgy of a movie is different from the dramaturgy of a novel. You ask how I was able to show the coldness of Erika Kohut's interior yet at the same time reveal her real feelings. It's a matter of empathy to understand the interior of a character. I tried . . . let's make it simpler: the novel is written in a language that is very judgmental. It's written in the third person, but with a tone so personal it gives the impression that it's written in the first person. A movie cannot do that. Cinema is more objective, with a coldness that allowed me to show the character of Erika in a very distant manner, while allowing for the actors to reveal intimate feelings.

lc Jelinek has talked about the unlive sexualit that is expressed in voyeurism. In the novel, Erika can't really participate in life, she can only see it. And what she sees is somehow more real than reality. It seems to me that in all your films, your characters have this obsessive relationship with screen

images. In *Benny's Video*, the young murderer has a more profound relationship with his video games than he does with other characters, and in *The Piano Teacher*, Erika haunts peep shows almost religiously. I was wondering how you would describe Erika's relationship to pornography. Is it different from her relationship to music, or even to other characters, like her mother, or her student Walter Klemmer?

mh I can't allow myself to give an explanation. If you ask questions about a character and I have to judge or explain a character, I will never do it. It's against the principle of my work. So if you'd like to ask questions about my point of view, about myself, then that's fine.

lc Fair enough. Perhaps what I'm wondering about is your own relationship as a filmmaker to video.

mh I want to go back to your question about reality. And the fact that to Erika, the reality of what she sees in the sex shop is more real than the feeling of reality in her "normal" life. I believe that is our general situation. We take reality in the media for reality, which naturally is not reality but only images of a reality. When we take the news that comes on TV as reality, it creates a state of derealization. It has nothing to do with reality. It's completely manipulated and it's false. We're actually deprived of reality. That's the theme of all my movies, and that's the danger.

lc There's a sentence in the novel you've elaborated upon in the movie that intrigued me. There is a moment where Erika and Walter Klemmer are having a conversation about Schubert and Schumann, and Erika talks about how Adorno described Schubert, in his most lucid compositions, as being aware of what it means to lose oneself before being completely abandoned. Why was this conversation about Schubert, and Schumann's descent into madness, important to you?

mh Because it allowed me to convey Erika's intimate feelings, all the while staying cold and distant. When a character like Erika talks about someone else it gives us the possibility to convey her interior state. If a character talks about the danger,



about another character's loss, it shows that they're in the same boat. So it's a very simple dramatic device. You may be right, it may be in the novel, but it's been a long time since I read it—I actually read it in Adorno. I'm a big admirer of his.

lc In the novel, Jelinek mentions Adorno very briefly. You brought it out in a much more intentional way.

mh Ah! I don't remember.

lc I was curious also about how you worked with music in *The Piano Teacher*. The novel is about music, yet you never use music as an emotional guide in your films.

mh Well, first off I have to say that I've been a great music aficionado since I was young, and wanted to become a pianist. I always think that music is too much to use in movies. Very often it is used to conceal the flaws of the film. But because the theme of the novel is essentially music, it gave me the opportunity to use it. It was a great pleasure to choose the pieces and lieder for *The Piano Teacher*. The story gave me permission to utilize music, which is something that I always forbid myself from doing because of my great admiration of it.

lc I am interested in the way you structure your films. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* is a work of fragments. So too is much of your own work: *Code Unknown*, *71 Fragments*



Benoît Magimel as Walter Klemmer in *The Piano Teacher*, 2002.

of a *Chronology of Chance*, your adaptation of Kafka's *The Castle*. You've said that you wanted to show the fragments of these stories within a totality. What do you mean by that?

mh I do think that our perception of reality is fragmentary, and in 20th-century literature, it's totally normal to not describe reality as something whole and completely transportable and explicable. That's been accepted in novels. But genre films always pretend that reality is transportable, which means that it is explicable. Truthfully, reality is not transportable or explicable. In literature, it's something that has been

accepted by everyone, but in the movies, we are always four steps back. It's not surprising that we are in this position, because it's a reassuring point of view for the public and with it one can make a lot of money. But if you consider cinema as art, then you have to be a little bit more concrete and realistic.

lc And your interest in Adorno?

mh But what do you want to hear? (*laughter*) When I was young, he was a huge influence. I studied philosophy and psychology, and I graduated with a degree in philosophy. Adorno and Wittgenstein were the two writers who influenced me the most. Now I don't read as much, but when you are young and sort of looking for a vision of the world, you are looking for people who would influence you, who would guide you. So I'm part of the 1968 generation when everybody was influenced by the Frankfurt School.

lc One of the other members of the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm, wrote about how capitalist society reproduces its structures within its members. Your first film, *The Seventh Continent*, has always suggested to me the ways that we are the victims of the structures that we've built.

mh I think the movie explained that quite clearly. I don't know what I can add. To me it's obvious that we create the walls around us, we create difficulties. But this is a banality. Actually, the horrible thing is that people are

trying to destroy things that have destroyed them already. And these are things that they themselves have built. There's an expression in German, "destroy the things that have destroyed you." This destruction of things that destroyed their lives is not a deliberate action. They destroy the things that have destroyed them in the same painful way that they created this universe that now smothers them. This is the real tragedy because all the destruction that they provoke is not a deliberate act. It cannot liberate them.

lc It's a difficult film, I think, for many people.

mh It's not a revolutionary film, it's a bitter film.

lc Earlier you were talking about the issue of empathy when trying to understand a character's interior landscape. I wonder if empathy is different than sympathy for you. One of the things that makes your films so difficult to watch is that the characters are hard to like.

mh (*laughter*)

lc For Americans this is a big deal. In order to sit through a film I think there is a certain expectation that one of the characters in the film will be sympathetic.

mh I like all my characters. (*laughter*) No, no, but I portray people who are deformed, as they are in *The Piano Teacher*. They are victims and the victim is perhaps not sympathetic in the way I want to identify myself with a character.



Isabelle Huppert and Benoît Magimel in *The Piano Teacher*, 2002.

EVERYONE HAS AN EXPECTATION OF LOVE—
I HAVE AN EXPECTATION OF LOVE,
YOU HAVE AN EXPECTATION OF LOVE.
BUT MOST OF THE TIME,
I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR EXPECTATION,
I JUST CARE ABOUT MY OWN EXPECTATION.
THIS IS THE TRAGEDY OF LOVE.

It's a sort of compassion. This is the human condition, not to be attracted to someone who is attractive and nice. That's too easy. One must have compassion for human beings. As an artist, without compassion, you are dead.

lc Well, I wouldn't say that I like your characters, but I think I can feel a kind of love for some of them, and that is what makes watching your movies such a visceral experience. I wonder if this is what you mean by compassion. Earlier, at the beginning of the interview, you said that you weren't interested in sadism and masochism. And yet in *The Piano Teacher* there seems to be a battle going on about the nature of love and power. One character says love is everything, and then at one point Walter Klemmer accuses Erika of not knowing what love is. Toward the end, Erika tells Klemmer, "I want what you want." What is this quality that he wants? Is this something you might describe as love?

mh It's very simple. That's the tragedy of all couples. They each want something different. They don't want the same thing—which is why "love" doesn't work. In general, everyone has an expectation of love—I have an expectation of love, you have an expectation of love. But most of the time, I don't care about your expectation, I just care about my own expectation. This is the tragedy of love. It's very difficult because it's a philosophical question, what is the definition of love? It would be too dan-

gerous for me to try to give a definition. Compassion is an essential part of love, but I am not a philosopher who can define love. The stories that I'm telling are helping us to locate and refine love in ourselves, to raise questions about its nature, but I can't give any explanations. It's not the work of either a writer or a filmmaker.

lc The moment a work stops asking questions and starts providing what you think are answers, you are treading into the territory of advertising. It seems to me that one of the ways you raise questions is by placing viewers on uncertain moral ground. You establish a complicity with them through humor and then leave them stranded with their laughter. In *Funny Games*, we're left at the end with this awfulness: what was I laughing at? There are moments when we can't help but laugh, and that laughter suddenly becomes something much more terrible, much more cruel. You've said that there are two types of laughter on the part of the spectator. How would you describe these?

mh Yeah. There's a false laughter, when a situation demands too much of the spectator, so it's the only escape. It's kind of a hysterical laughter. Then there's a second kind, where you are in agreement with what happened and you suddenly understand something. Those two ways of laughing exist in *The Piano Teacher*. For example, in the scene in the middle of the film in the bathroom. That's horrible, but it's

also very funny and amusing. It's comical but it's not exactly comical. It's more grotesque because it goes to an extreme. Everybody understands this in our personal lives. There are situations that are horrible but are more realistic because they're also comical. They're not just tragic. Very often, the worst in a situation is its comical element because it doesn't allow us to retire into the dignity, the pathos of the tragedy. It's also horrible, but it doesn't allow us to feel grand because it's ridiculous at the same time.

lc Earlier you spoke of the need to avoid giving explanations—in your responses as well as in your films—and I wondered, is there a difference for you between telling a story and creating a plot in a film?

mh In American mainstream cinema, the public always expects an explanation and that is what American film offers. There is always a resolution to the problem, to the issue being presented, and it's always a lie. Anybody with any kind of intelligence knows that the resolution isn't really possible. When you want to make film as an artist, you have to approach reality in a more fragmentary way. But not only in a fragmentary way, in a way that is more concrete, more serious, not as full of lies and not as deceitful. So, again, the only thing that a novel or a movie can do is to ask questions without giving the answers. If it were otherwise, the world would not be the way it is. ◊