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# A Companion to Michael Haneke

Edited by Roy Grundmann, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010

Review by Fredrik Gustafsson

*A Companion to Michael Haneke* is a somewhat intimidating book. It is black, heavy and on the cover Haneke himself is staring at the reader, his face floating in darkness, apparently disconnected from the rest of his body. The book is also intimidating in its scope, as the 600+ pages cover more or less every aspect of Haneke's career to date. It consists of 33 different essays, each looking at either a particular film or a particular theme, written by well-established scholars such as Michel Chion and Thomas Elsaesser, as well as PhD candidates. The book is the first volume of Wiley-Blackwell's series 'Companion to Film Directors' and two more have been released so far (on Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog). Considering the dedication and depth of the series, the more directors that are covered the better.

A concern whenever a particular filmmaker is singled out in this way is that claims will be made on his or her behalf that are hard to substantiate. For example, Haneke is called the last remaining European auteur or, even more bafflingly, the last 'avant-gardist' (p. 169). The implications are that not only is Haneke the only auteur (and avant-gardist) working today, but also that there will be no more, and both of these statements are dubious, as well as unnecessary. But even without such claims there are a lot of interesting things to be said about Haneke, and this book is a testament to the richness of his work.

*A Companion to Michael Haneke* is not the sort of book you read from cover to cover, but is best read one essay at a time. Not only because of its impressive size but also because there is a sense of repetition and déjà vu, with the same films and the same thinkers, such as Freud, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno, Barthes and Deleuze, mentioned again and again. But that is only to be expected in such an exhaustive collection. Perhaps the best essay is the introduction by Roy Grundmann. It is a comprehensive presentation of Haneke's entire oeuvre, together with commentary on its reception, and will be particularly beneficial for those who are not familiar with all aspects of Haneke's work, such as his early work for Austrian TV. The rest of the essays are more specific and the ones that I felt were particularly good are by Thomas Elsaesser, Vinzenz Hediger, Alex Lykidis and Charles Warren.

Elsaesser's contribution 'Performative Self-Contradictions' discusses a

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few key themes (isolation, the sudden invasion of outside forces on private lives, media critique) in Haneke's films and how they are related to "mind-games movies", a concept Elsaesser has developed in earlier writings. Here Elsaesser describes it as films 'where a number of assumptions about how we understand what we see and hear in a film, as well as what comprises agency, are tested and renegotiated' (p. 58). Hediger's piece 'Infectious Images' analyses Haneke's use of video images, as opposed to film images, as a sort of meta-criticism, and compares it to the ways in which James Cameron and Atom Egoyan also use video imagery in their films. In an essay titled 'Multicultural Encounters,' Lykidis looks at the films Haneke has made in France, from the perspective of France's fraught relationship with immigration and non-whites. And finally, in an essay titled 'The Unknown Piano Teacher,' Charles Warren looks at one of Haneke's films in particular, *La pianiste/The Piano Teacher* (2001), and puts it in a film history context using Stanley Cavell's writings on the 'unknown woman' and melodrama.

The book ends with two older pieces written by Haneke himself. The first is about his first experiences as a young boy of the power and allure of cinema, and his own views on, and tastes in, films. Most specifically he writes about the work of Robert Bresson. The other piece is less personal, and less interesting, and is about Haneke's views on violence in media. These two pieces by him are then followed, fittingly, with two interviews with Haneke. In a way this last part of the book is reminiscent of the extra material that usually accompanies films on DVDs, and it is a nice touch.

There is for me one big problem with the book, and that is its conservatism and 'high culture' emphasis. The films of Haneke can often feel like sermons from an angry priest who is appalled by the wickedness of the world, and the tone in many of the essays feels similar. It is taken as a fact that we are living in a world where, to quote one example: 'passivity is the dominant state of today's subject who, conditioned to consume images, confuses them with reality' (p. 125). The 'cultural and psycho-social impoverishment of modern civilization' (p. 38) is mentioned, and it is stated that our culture is based on 'repressiveness and mediocrity' (p. 491). My problem with this is two-fold. First, it is an elitist assumption and implicit is that if only the common man would stop watching Hollywood film and read Kant and Thomas Mann instead the world would be a much better place, something that is very hard to argue and is probably not true at all. Second, it is a very euro-centric assumption. There is nothing progressive or helpful in looking at the world in this way, and Haneke is also partly guilty of this elitist conservatism. Nevertheless, this can be seen as a particular aspect central to European intellectual history and consequently, to call Haneke a radical is to my mind unhelpful. It could have been appropriate if there

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had been attempts in the book to problematise Haneke's views and ideas, but there is very little of that. At the same time I feel that Haneke is actually more complex than some of his interpreters give him credit for, even those celebrating his work.

Part of this European intellectual tradition is to use America as the other against which Europe is portrayed as superior and European cinema as the antithesis of Hollywood, a view that Haneke and many of the contributors apparently share. This too is problematic, as well as self-congratulatory. It is easy to agree with Hediger when he suggests that 'Haneke's understanding of American cinema is somewhat deficient' (p. 100). European cinema can be just as bad as the worst of Hollywood, and the best of Hollywood is equal to the best of Europe, and nothing is gained by this othering.

However, this criticism should not discourage the potential reader. Leaving politics aside the discussions about Haneke's narrative and stylistic achievements are more often than not good and insightful. Haneke scholars as well as general film students have a lot to gain by reading *A Companion to Michael Haneke* and Wiley-Blackwell is to be applauded for having initiated the project.