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**A Companion to  
Michael Haneke**

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Edited by

**Roy Grundmann**

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# A Companion to Michael Haneke

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**  
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# Introduction

## *Haneke's Anachronism*

Roy Grundmann

If there is a dominant characteristic that can be said to mark Michael Haneke's path as a filmmaker, it is that of anachronism. But in contrast to what the term's comparative logic implies, Haneke's anachronism did not develop gradually over the course of his by now four decades-long career. It seems to be one of its long-standing attributes, having been inscribed into his formative years as a critic, screenwriter, and script editor, and having accompanied the evolution of his filmmaking through numerous phases. In 1989, in the first important critical essay on Haneke as a filmmaker, Alexander Horwath singles out anachronism as the very quality that characterizes Haneke's late transition into theatrical feature filmmaking and that distinguishes his artistic status across this transition. Citing examples from Haneke's TV films and his 1989 theatrical feature film debut, *The Seventh Continent*, Horwath places Haneke among a dwindling group of filmmakers who continue to occupy a middle ground between mass commercial entertainment and the marginal avant-garde and experimental scene (1991: 39). Thematically, Haneke's films remain concerned with central problematics of modernity; aesthetically, they do not constitute radically new territory, but they do pervasively redeploy and combine stylistic idioms of four decades of European art cinema. Since *The Seventh Continent* premiered at Cannes, Haneke's image of being a hold-out from another period has also been cultivated by the director himself. When the same festival, twenty years later, awarded its *Palme d'or* to *The White Ribbon* – an austere, two and a half hours-long, black-and-white film about a German village on the eve of World War I – it reconfirmed this image.

But if the 2009 Cannes trophy has ensured that Haneke's image as a representative of a past era remains current, adding to his cultural capital and public esteem even as it triggers a certain amount of critical ambivalence, Haneke's anachronism also adds to the factors that make him a rewarding subject of academic study. His body of work invites the full spectrum of approaches the field of cinema studies has brought to the analysis of narrative film. Consisting of twenty-one feature films<sup>1</sup> that were made over four decades in two media, in several countries, different

languages, and divergent production contexts, Haneke's career is marked by detours and deferrals, belated debuts, and retroactively bestowed memberships. It constitutes a fertile case study for film historians and theorists alike. For historians Haneke's films exemplify the intertwined relations between television and national cinema on the one hand and transnational auteurism and art cinema on the other. For theorists, they raise intriguing questions regarding narrative structure, genre, spectatorship, and the ontology of the image, while also proving of interest to broader debates on the relationship between aesthetics, philosophy, and history, and presenting an intriguing challenge to aesthetic and philosophical periodization. While evincing strong affinities with philosophical and cinematic modernism, Haneke's films also address phenomena associated with postmodernism. Notwithstanding Haneke's own modernist posturing and postmodern critics' eagerness to take him by his word, it may be his films' dual referencing of the modern and the postmodern that merits further interest in them.

Born in 1942, Haneke is too young for his modernism to be based on generational membership. Instead, he has assimilated modernism through academic exposure to a broad literary and artistic canon. He has been influenced by a range of authors that include Stéphane Mallarmé, Jean Améry, Joseph Roth, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, and Ingeborg Bachmann; by composers Franz Schumann, Alban Berg, and Arnold Schönberg; by philosophers Theodor W. Adorno, Lucien Goldman, and Albert Camus; and, of course, by the filmmakers of the high modernist generation, specifically Robert Bresson, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Andrei Tarkovsky. Haneke's age sets him two generations apart from these directors, and still one full generation from most proponents of the various European new waves, whose more playful and irreverent films, together with those of the high modernists, formed the apogee of European art cinema, a period that lasted approximately from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s.

This period constitutes Haneke's formative years as an intellectual and his early phase as a director, which is accounted for in detail in Horwath's essay. In the early 1960s, after abandoning a career as a concert pianist, Haneke studied philosophy and literature at the University in Vienna. He worked as a feuilleton critic and, from 1967 to the early 1970s, as a script editor for television. But this job did not lead to any opportunities for directing films. He wrote his own screenplay, which garnered a major film subsidy award but went unproduced, which caused him to leave television and find work in theater. His growing reputation as a stage director finally earned him a directing commission from his erstwhile employer, the regional southwest German network SWF (Horwath 1991: 15). His first film, *After Liverpool* (1974), was a low-budget two-person drama based on James Saunders's play about the oppressive dynamics and entropic patterns of relationships, paying particular attention to the onset of routine, non-communication, alienation, and malaise. These issues would become standard Haneke themes.

Haneke's choice of source material suggests his critical interest in the bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> But in contrast to, say, Rainer Werner Fassbinder or Jean-Luc Godard, who also

came from a bourgeois background, Haneke did not become politically radicalized during the 1960s. Instead of understanding contemporary politics through Marxist models of thought, as was highly common during this period, he was interested in more traditional humanist issues, in metaphysical themes and what he perceived as Western civilization's pervasive spiritual crisis. Thus, he remained closer to Sartre and Camus than to Mao and Marx and he took a particular interest in the religious philosopher Blaise Pascal. Though he developed a keen eye for the problems of his own class, his work did not focus on class struggle, imperialism, or the oppression of third world countries. While eager to work creatively in film and theater, he neither founded a political cinema collective (as Godard did with the Dziga Vertov Group), nor did he join any radical experimental theater group (such as Fassbinder's Antitheater). Instead of fighting the state, whether on the streets or in front of the Cinémathèque Française, he went to work for it, reading scripts for state-funded television. In the early 1970s Haneke quit his full-time job at the network, but his relationship to television would have a lasting impact on his career. Not only would TV remain a central source of film funding for decades to come, but it also in complex ways defined Haneke's status as a national and transnational filmmaker.

## Television, Auteurism, and National Cinema

Although the heyday of the new waves was over by the time Haneke got to make his first film, their German variant had produced a second generation of filmmakers who were Haneke's age or slightly younger. By the mid-1970s, these directors, most notably Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, and Wim Wenders, were becoming international art house directors, making what was called the New German Cinema the decade's dominant European art cinema and, in fact, one of the last national cinemas in Europe to stand in this tradition. However, while the New German Cinema relied heavily on television for the financing and exhibition of many of its films and while most of Haneke's TV films of the 1970s and 1980s were made either exclusively by or with coproduction monies from various German television stations, Haneke did not become part of Germany's national film culture. Of course, we need to acknowledge that Haneke, while born in Germany, grew up in Austria and has lived there most of his life. But this statement does not, in and of itself, constitute an argument about the nationally specific aspects of Haneke's filmmaking. The question of national identification (in which citizenship is, in any case, only one aspect) is rather complex, because it tends to raise more questions than it answers about the national as a discursive category and about the cultural, institutional, and historical registers in which it gets debated and defined.<sup>3</sup> Raising these questions is partially the purpose of this introduction, and, as we have just started to see, looking at European cinema from the 1960s on means taking into consideration the institution of state-sponsored television.



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