

Article

Pradip Biswas

Michael Haneke: Sculpting in Image*Amour*

Michael Haneke, the master craftsman and genuine auteur of Austrian Cinema has vibrantly scored at the 65th Cannes Film Festival winning the Palm d'Or for his film *Amour*. This is the second Palme d'Or for the Munich-born Haneke, who is famous for the ascetic precision of expression and artistry of his cinema. His *The White Ribbon* also won the Palm d'Or in 2009. He also won the best director prize in 2005 for *Hidden* (Cache), a feat not other European directors have won in a trot. Interestingly *Amour* (Love) is the heart-breaking story of two lovers in their 80s facing the inevitable end as their biological systems and bodies betray them. The critic Bruce Kirkland of QMI Agency has hailed *Amour* as “invitation to geriatric degeneration.”

Michael Haneke is one of the most important directors of European auteur cinema. He worked for two decades as a television editor, theater and TV

director, before directing his first feature film, *The Seventh Continent*, in 1989. It may please be noted that Michael Haneke has had a different take on the role of cinema in his domain. In films like the study of violence *Funny Games* (1997), *The Piano Teacher* (2001), an adaptation of an Elfriede Jelinek novel, and the thriller *Caché* (2005), he takes courage to dissect the fragility of middle-class life and man's culpability. In his black-and-white film *The White Ribbon*, which has rocked the German theaters for their quaint vitality and social relevance, look often cathartic and niggling. Following the particles of historicity he portrays life in a northern German village on the eve of World War-I. In the nightmarish work, which was awarded the Palme d'Or in Cannes a year ago became vying for an Oscar nomination. Haneke describes a world shaped by rigid Protestantism, discipline carried to extremes, narrow-

mindedness, mendacity and coldness – and leaves his audience deeply troubled. Says he: “We are always obsessed by fear”. Thus human-beings in any circumstances are an object of subjugation of either kind, political or military.

The Austrian maestro Michael Haneke seems to have paraded his penchant for gloomy stories that unnerve his viewers and his unsettling view of humanity in his film *The White Ribbon*. While putting his film under scanner, the director replies against “Bleakness” that many critics have alleged against him and his works. Haneke is insightful to say that his film contains a beautiful love story, which isn't bleak, and there are moments of tenderness. Says he: “But I am stereotyped for portraying only our dark sides. I believe that I love people, but even the most likeable people don't come with a guarantee that they'll always remain likeable. Each of us is capable of anything. It just takes being in the right situation.”



The White Ribbon

The White Ribbon portrays a German village in 1913 and 1914, shortly before the beginning of World War-I, in which mysterious acts of violence occur. The human relationships in the village are deeply troubled. There are no heroes, and there is no salvation. In a way one picks up a negative view of humanity as is on view. He however spikes such notional aberration and says his view of humanity isn't negative. But the world in which we live is dominated by disorders. He believes that the purpose of drama is to illustrate conflicts and it's something he likes to take seriously. Indeed, in the film the folks in his film are particularly disturbed - dishonest, cruel and weak. Besides, Haneke grew up without a father

and were raised by mother, grandmother and aunt and many critics are convinced that his films are reflections of such phenomenon.

To this, however, Haneke retorts back: “I never suffered from the absence of a father. On the contrary, as a child I was more inclined to see men as a disturbing factor. It made things difficult for me when I started working as a director. I had trouble dealing with men, and cockfights erupted quickly. I was used to being the cock of the walk.”

There is a clear tendency that shows Haneke always coming down on the side of the women in his films and go on defending the clan. It is his faith and he thinks it's a little simplistic to explain a work through the psychology of its author. In other words, that he has emotional problems can be felt intimately. But he comments: “One has to take his films seriously. By using this argument, the viewer retreats from the challenges of the film. People often use this approach, but I'm used to it by now.”

“Every Film Rapes the Viewer”, believes Haneke. The statement sounds too harsh and non-aesthetic. So, we may have other takes in the matter. But he is not moved by crafty logic. It's certainly a valid question. In film *The White Ribbon*, we discover even the children are cold and cruel, detached from the softness of humanity. But Haneke's conviction is that he does not believe that children are innocent. In fact, no one seriously believes that. Just go to a playground and watch the kids playing in the sandbox! The romantic notion of the sweet child is simply the parents projecting their own wishes. The issue is very alive in the film. But his films also often portray the family, the foundation of human civilization, as a collection of speechless zombies. Where does this come from? Retorts he: “Before you start digging around in my psyche again: I was very happy in my three-woman family. But even as a child, I understood the difficulties of communication. I say blue, you hear green, because your sensors are set up differently. Sometimes it even happens in interviews, right? Everyone has this experience constantly, starting in the family.”

It is often found in his film he treats and describe how children, as a result of a strict Protestant upbringing, are raised to be guilt-ridden slaves to

authority. Truly, Haneke admits that “Yes, these children are raised to be recipients of orders. They are supposed to learn to accept authority - even while gnashing their teeth. But education has always meant the taming of individual freedom so that one can be integrated into society. The children in the film turn their parents' ideals about childrearing into something absolute, even though they don't bring them any happiness or joy.”

In a strange strophe we see 20 years later these children, as adults, are prepared to form the foundation of German fascism. Is that what he is driving at? Says he: “You could see it that way. It isn't a coincidence that the village is called Eichwald. When strictness becomes an end in itself, and when an idea turns into ideology, it becomes perilous for anyone who doesn't comply with this ideology. The film uses the example of German fascism to talk about the mental preconditions for every type of terrorism, whether it comes from the right or the left, and whether it's politically or religiously motivated. Wherever people are in hopeless, unhappy and humiliating situations, they will grasp at any straw that is handed to them.”

At the Cannes Film Festival, the critics were curious to see this new film by Michael Haneke, because they thought it might be more 'humane' than his others, dealing as it does with two elderly people. According to some they find *Amour* really no different than other Haneke films: A section of critics say: “You're straight-jacketed into your seat for 2 hours and given very little elbow room for self-reflection. It's like gagging for 2 hours before you finally choke. And his cinematic skills of manipulation are as finely-tuned as ever - drawing you in and detaining you indefinitely. In many ways it is his most violent film.”

It is added that like his other ruminations on violence and depravity, if you're curious about someone else's deterioration, you're going to pay for it, whether you like it or not. And this being a Michael Haneke film, you do. There's no 'amour' here. Away from Cannes, this film should look quite small on a large screen. Surely, the remark has not been licked by many admirers of Haneke who probably wanted to see more of *The Piano Teacher*.



The Piano Teacher

Haneke's film tells the tale of Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Emmanuelle Riva), an elderly Parisian couple preparing for death. As befits a Haneke picture, it is pitiless and unsparing in its focus on the ugly business of dying, wheeling its heroine remorselessly from concert-hall to wheelchair to deathbed. Since this critic has not yet seen the film as it is yet to visit International Film Festivals of India, much of discourse would be left to what the major film critics have said about the film. The Guardian critic writes: “For all that, the director's tender, respectful treatment of these characters (and the love that they share) provides a crucial palliative. One has the sense that Haneke is at least holding our hands as he draws us, on the gurney, towards the light. At least, on the key decision, the judges got it right. Michael Haneke's *Amour* is a masterful movie from a director at the peak of his powers; a shattering drama about the rituals of parting, the ties that bind us, and the agony of loss.” *Amour* is said to be harsh, heart-breaking and tragic. So, its winning of Palme d'Or looks justified.

The critic Steven Zeitchik describes, Sunday night's post-screening standing ovation, a key measure of Cannes sentiment, topped seven minutes, and audience members could be heard buzzing about the film on the way out in the manner you wouldn't expect from a film about a slow death. Like its main characters' existence, the film's dramatic furniture is simple. Some problems with their grown daughter (Isabelle Huppert) notwithstanding, octogenarians Anne (Emmanuelle Riva) and Georges (Jean-Luis Trintignant) have led a comfortable, cultured life as music teachers, and seem to be enjoying a relaxed

retirement. But when Anne is felled by a stroke, their idyll is destroyed. She begins declining mentally and physically, and he is pressed into a thousand difficult tasks while watching the love of his life fade away, asked to do a lot but not able to do anything where it really counts.

Says the same critic: "It's the kind of movie that brings filmgoers starkly face-to-face with the realities of failing health and death. Older viewers will be more likely to focus on themselves; younger filmgoers will think of parents and grandparents. Those with good memories and/or a taste for mortality cinema might watch *Amour* and recall *Away From Her*, Sarah Polley's 2006 examination of a marriage ravaged by dementia, though there's undeniably something more intimate and under-your-skin here."



Caché

Besides, major scribes with good understanding feel there are also a few shocking moments in the vein of some of Haneke's more famous provocations, but it's generally a low-key work; if gentle Haneke isn't an oxymoron, then that's how it's best described. More shortly from Haneke himself on his eclectic career- from *The Piano Teacher* to *Cache* to *The White Ribbon* - and the process behind this film.

Some moviegoers know of Haneke's reputation as a master of the uncomfortable and may pass on those grounds; others simply may not want to see a drama focused on death and dying and geriatric degeneration, a frightful sight for those who are cowards.

Much of the promotional campaign, though, could be built around the actors, whose back stories

are almost as compelling as the film. In their eighties themselves and, as a press conference indicated, more slow-footed than they once were, Riva and Trintignant hark back to an earlier time in entertainment. Riva, whose performance here makes her an instant Oscar contender, began her career in the wartime romance *Hiroshima Mon Amour* 53 years ago. Incidentally, she would turn 86.

Trintignant had been in retirement and hadn't had a bona fide film part in nearly 15 years before Haneke lured him back. "I didn't want to act in films anymore," Trintignant told reporters Sunday morning, saying he had been concentrating on occasional theater work. "But when Haneke offered me this part it was an exception," describing how demanding the filmmaker is. He then added to some laughter, "I think he's one of the great directors in the world, and it's a wonderful opportunity. But I won't do it again."

In the first scene of *Amour*, firemen break down the front door of a Paris apartment and find a bedroom door sealed to discourage entry. Inside is the corpse of an elderly woman, her hands folded, flower petals wreathing her head. The Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke might have been chosen to be the chief prosecutor of modern man's sins. His relentless depiction of the inhumanity to which civilized people can descend has raised cries of cinematic sadism. No one, however, disputes his mastery of camera mood in the modern psychodramas *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and *Caché* (2005) and the period epic *The White Ribbon* (2009), which portrays collective guilt in a German town 20 years before the rise of Hitler.

Interestingly, Haneke's all three films premiered and won prizes at Cannes, the debut of Haneke's latest work was welcome news to festivalgoers. The director did not disappoint.

Amour possesses many of the filmmaker's touchstones: an austere, majestic visual style, a central couple whose names are some variations of George and Anne, an enclosed setting that allows no exit for either the characters or their demons, and an abrupt act of violence. The difference here is the compassion that Haneke affords the two people in this story, and the love, not twisted or ironic, they show each other, the Guardian critic affirms.

Haneke seems to have created a tiny suspense in a naughty manner. At breakfast, when he expects Anne to fill an empty saltshaker, she doesn't respond, and for several minutes her mind is a blank slate. Haneke builds the suspense with Hitchcockian precision: Georges' concern as he wets a dish towel and applies it to her neck, and then, as in a panic he dresses in another room to go for help, his stricken surprise when he realizes that the kitchen faucet he left running suddenly stops. Georges returns to find that Anne is her vital self again, but, in another subtle shock, when she pours the tea she misses the cup. Doctors say she suffered an obstruction of the carotid; but the surgery goes wrong, leaving the right side of her body paralyzed, with the imminent threat of another, more severe stroke that could rob her of all physical agility. As if rushing to review her life before the curtain falls, she reminds her husband that he was "a monster sometimes, but very kind" and asks him to retrieve a family album containing decades-old photographs of them and Eva. "C'est belle, la vie," Anne says.

Having promised Anne that he will not take her back to the hospital, Georges becomes his wife's hospice caregiver, with the help of nurses who tend to her three times a week. As an exercise for her impaired speech, Georges sings to her the traditional ballad "Sur le pont d'Avignon"; that stirs some participation. But often Anne's mood is one of feral defiance. When Georges feeds his wife a few spoons of soft food or a sip of liquid, her eyes telegraph dark secrets. Is she horrified? Pleading? Empty? At a later feeding, he must pry open her mouth to force in the liquid. After she spits it out for the third time, he slaps her. Their roles now are willful child and exasperated father.

Haneke's narrative that he supports psychologically informs us that they have been married for at least a half century - and in love, or loving each other, for at least that long. So, to a tough audience of one, Georges recapitulates aspects of their courtship, telling her stories of his youth, writing letters she will never be able to read. Says Haneke: "It is all my device to pilot the plot."

His devotion is as intense as any young man's passion, and more enclosing because no one can interrupt it. Teen lovers may believe they are the only two people in the world, but this is the literal truth for Georges and Anne in their last days. The couple's early love may have been a world blooming with possibility; in their last days together, love means shouldering the responsibilities of nurse, parent and bedside companion. Georges never complains of these duties, and would never default on his promissory note to Anne.

His films avoid drama. Yet one finds streak of dramatic strophe. Is drama required in his kind of films? To this Haneke communicates: "I believe that the purpose of drama is not to let you go home feeling reassured. That was never its purpose, even as far back as the Greek tragedies. Every film is manipulative, raping the viewer. So, the question is: Why do I rape the viewer? I try to rape him into being reflective, and into being intellectually independent and seeing his role in the game of manipulation. I believe in his intelligence. At its best, film should be like a ski jump. It should give the viewer the option of taking flight, while the act of jumping is left up to him."

▲ Mr. Pradip Biswas is Film Critic and Author, a former Member of Fipresci-India, based in Kolkata.