

Michael Haneke: The Horror of Ideology

BY ANDREW FISH PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID MIEZAL

You never forget a film by Michael Haneke. Once seen, its images, crimes, and violations remain lodged in memory, their disturbing nature bringing into question concepts one normally chooses to avoid entirely. Implicating the malaise of modern society, and people's unwillingness to be honest with themselves, the equally revered and vilified Austrian filmmaker has explored the tendency of secrets and repressed emotion to result in catastrophe. Expect no satisfaction from a Haneke film, as disquieting questions are raised, never answered, and left to wander in one's mind in perpetuity. This month's *The White Ribbon*, set in northern Germany at the dawn of World War I, is the auteur's first historical picture, and marks his return to German-language film after nearly a decade of predominantly French productions.

Haneke's first feature film was *The Seventh Continent* (1989), which depicted the repetitive, lifeless day-to-day of an Austrian husband, wife, and daughter, who ultimately commit suicide. His follow-up was *Benny's Video* (1992), about an indifferent teenage boy who spends most of his life amid his video equipment, and whose fascination with the slaughter of a pig transitions to his murdering of an adolescent girl, and the ultimate framing of his own parents for the act. The third installment of what Haneke terms his Glaciation Trilogy, is *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, a documentation of the sterile, lackluster lives of disparate characters, all to be involved in a mass slaying at an Austrian bank. Haneke then released *Funny Games* (1997), the story of a wealthy family taken hostage and killed by two cultured, well-groomed young men in golfing attire, a film the director later remade in the U.S., nearly shot for shot, with Naomi Watts, Tim Roth, and Michael Pitt (2008). As with many of Haneke's films, the violence itself takes place slightly off-screen, with the bloody after-effects serving as the subject of the driven director's interminable focus. Both versions of *Funny Games* were ripe with audience walkouts and livid criticism for their cold-blooded brutality. The movie is painfully difficult to watch, yet it's one that Haneke stands by so staunchly that he made it twice.

As Austrian financing began to dry up, it was internationally acclaimed thespian Juliette Binoche who ensured Haneke's creative future. The screen star was taken with the director's style of quiet observation and the insistence that the audience draw its own conclusions, and invited him to collaborate with her in France. The result was *Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys* (2000), set primarily in Paris, which observed the road to loss begun with a sin-

gle act of thoughtless cruelty. Haneke's second French production, *The Piano Teacher* (2001), proved to be his most successful film to date. Spurred by Isabelle Huppert's intense portrayal of a socially isolated and sexually disturbed music professor, the controversial piece succeeded in Haneke's goal of being obscene yet devoid of titillation, and became an international art-house hit. The post-apocalyptic *Time of the Wolf* (2003) followed, after which Haneke and Binoche teamed up once more with *Caché* (2005), the critically acclaimed investigation into a childhood secret that tears a well-to-do, intellectual husband and wife apart. The buried memory alienates them both from their son, and leaves a suicide in its wake. *Caché* won numerous prizes, including three from Cannes and five from the European Film Awards — both including Best Director.

Also a success at Cannes, the Golden Palm-winning *The White Ribbon* is a black-and-white vision of a Protestant village hierarchy, with the wealthy Baron and his family at the top, his advisors and servants perched precariously beneath him, and the farmers underfoot. The questions begin with the mysterious, malicious wounding of the town doctor, which offers the first hint of percolating fury. As the crime fades from the eyes of the law, and further acts of unexplained vengeance take its place, one begins to suspect that the village Pastor's rigid devotion to his children's discipline may be just the kind of repression that leads to violence. The tale is presented as a memory of the local schoolteacher, who recalls these events as the circumstances under which he found the woman he would one day marry. Thus Haneke has designed an unsettling exploration of the origin of hatred and the seeds of fascism in the context of a love story.

We meet with Haneke and his interpreter to discuss the ideas behind *The White Ribbon*, and his thoughts on the importance of unanswered questions and discomforting cinema.

Venice: A common theme in your films seems to be that the origin of human cruelty lies in the thoughts and emotion that we suppress. In *The White Ribbon*, the suppression of the spirit leads to the corruption of a community — and, likely, to an entire country later on.

Michael Haneke: The basic idea of this film was that in an area where you have a lot of repression and suffering of people — and humiliation — how this lays the groundwork, such that ideologies can be established for these people, because they need something to hold onto. So the issue for me is how an ideology can form itself, and it's always been when an idea that was introduced suddenly becomes absolute. This is for all kinds of

ideologies. The idea can be good or bad, but once it becomes absolute, in all cases, it becomes dangerous. It becomes very strict, and can be used for radicalism. In general, morals or restrictions are not bad in themselves, but the moment you use them as tools to repress other people, then they become dangerous. And this is applicable to right-wing ideology, left-wing ideology, religion, and politics. You could make a film in a present-day Middle Eastern country and show how the Muslim religion has been used as a tool for repression. The purpose is the same, but the film would look different simply because of the setting. For me, it's important that it is taken in a broader sense, not just Nazi Germany or right-wing politics.

What are the specific elements that are repressed in people, and how is that used to gain control over them?

Every individual liberty. A basic example is a dog that isn't trained, and isn't housebroken yet. I like the word "housebroken," because it already has the word "broken" in it. Everyone who has personal freedom and lives that way, even if it is a child, it gets destroyed, or broken up, to fit into society.

At what point does that become dangerous?

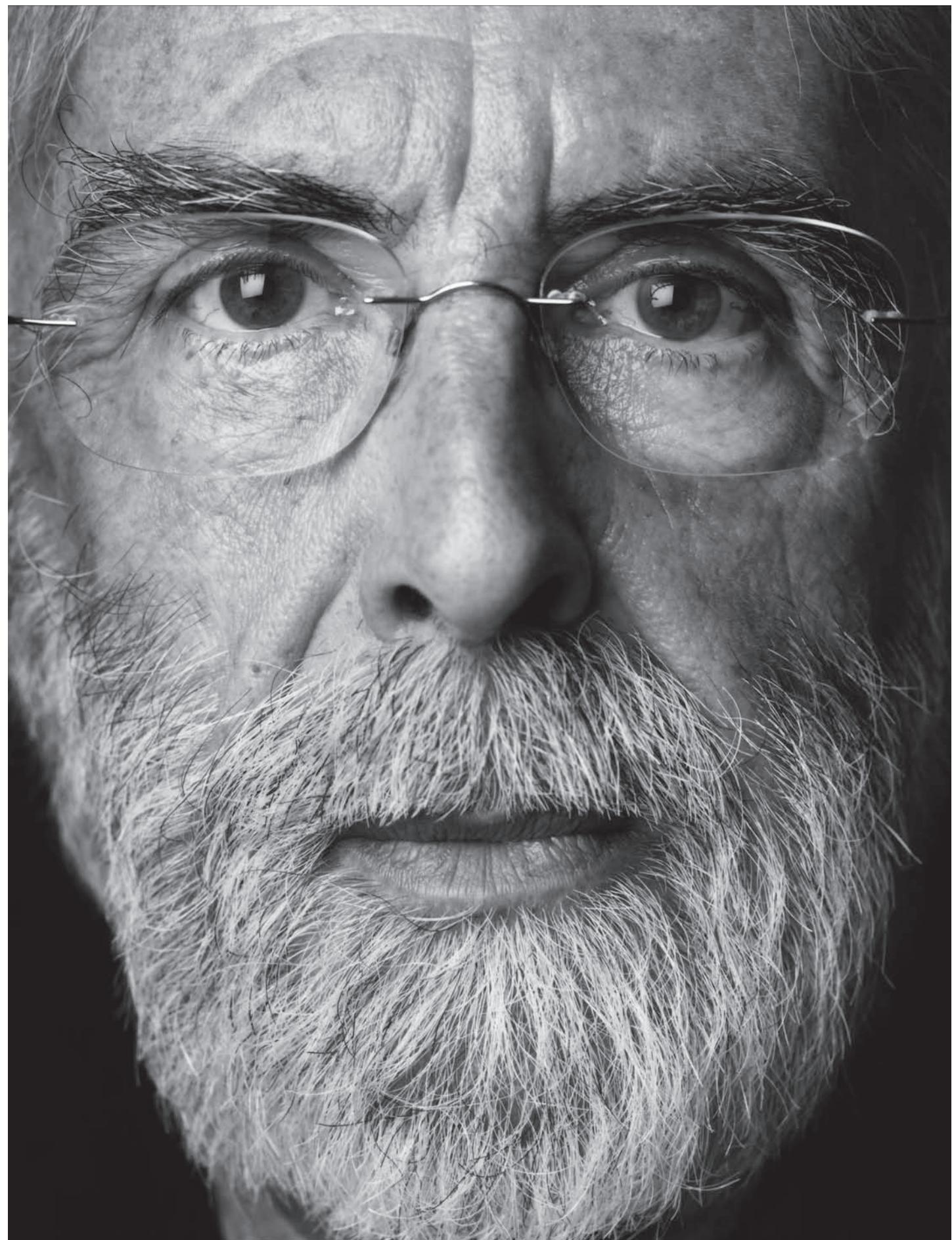
That's a delicate question, because it's very hard to measure, or almost impossible to measure, because it takes place on so many different levels. And there's always the question: At what point is it — like in this village in *White Ribbon* or in any society — what is the moment that your own dignity is in their control? With every humiliation, begins hatred. And every education contains this element of humiliation.

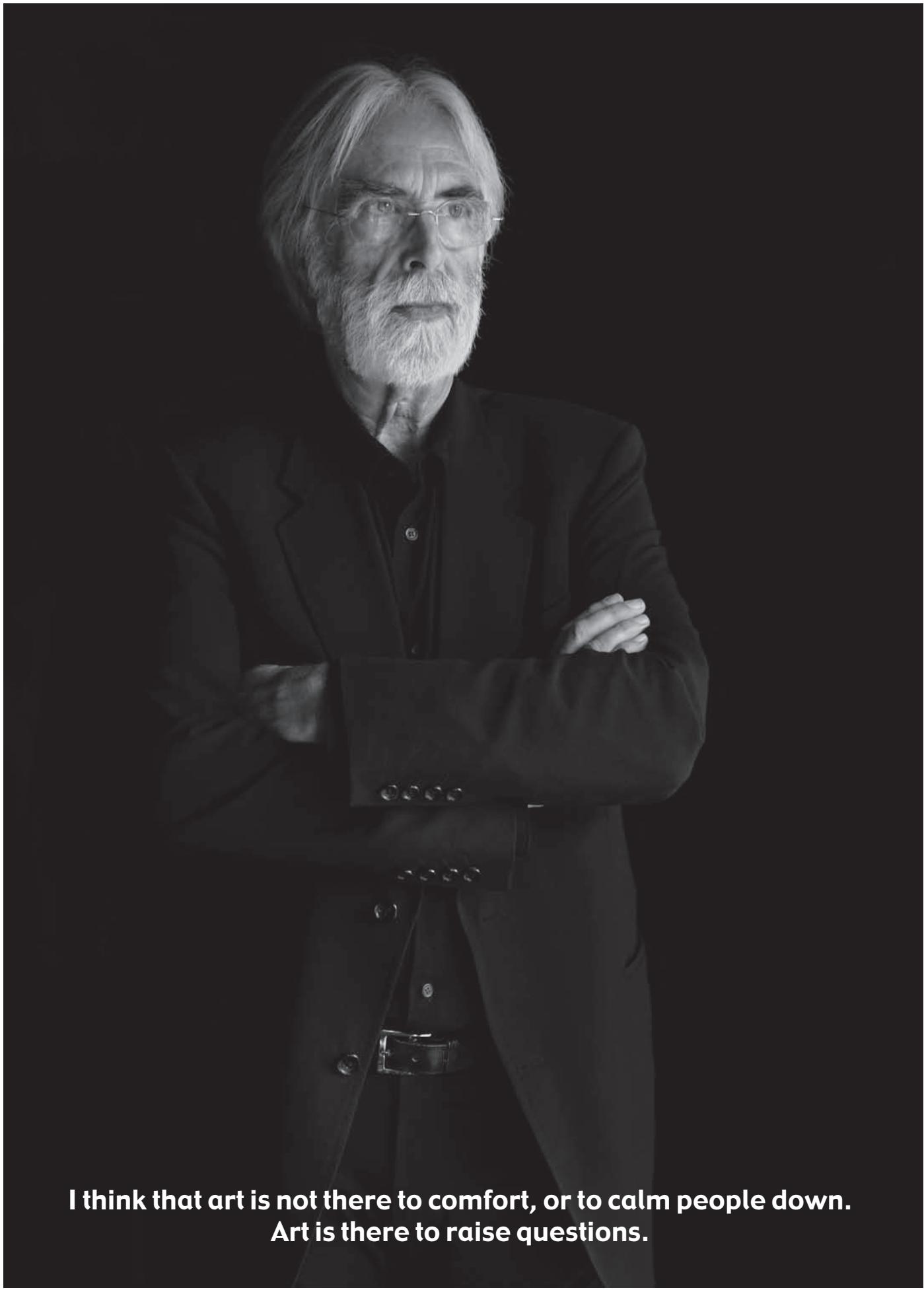
Once you have this resentment, or hatred, that builds up because of these broken liberties, how does that make it easier for a large power to dictate the actions of the people?

Because we haven't the power to resist. We learn our behavior when we are little, and it's very difficult to learn other things afterwards. I always ask myself why the Italian fascism was so different from the German fascism. It was the same ideology behind it, but the way it was acted out in the country was very different.

What were some of the differences?

One of the biggest differences is the connection to religion. In northern Germany, which is where this film is set, it's a very Protestant area, and this religion is very strict, with a focus on order. "I just followed my orders." While in Italy, for example, this politic was connected with the Catholic religion, which appears to be totally different





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Art is there to raise questions.**

from Germany. There was a German leftist terrorist group called the Baader Meinhof Group, in the '70s mostly, and these two leading women, Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin both came from families where their fathers were Protestant pastors. So there was a very rigorous order to their society, more rigorous than the way the Catholic Church would demand from people. Their terrorist group started out with things that were perceived as positive, because they were against the Vietnam War. They were against capitalism, and then they started to throw bombs into big department stores, and it became more and more dangerous. They took people as hostages and they killed people. Key figures in industry were captured and killed, so more and more they moved from criticism to a leftist terrorist group. And the roots of these two key figures' behavior was this Protestantistic, rigorous behavior and its demands. So there was a moral behind their actions, but it was so rigorous that it became dangerous. To bring it back to this film, it is not a film against Protestantism, and it's not a film against religion in general — and if it were a film in an Arabian country, it wouldn't be against Islam — the film is against the process of ideas becoming ideologies, which become so rigorously enforced that you cannot breathe anymore. And that's the context of the film. The moment this idea becomes an ideology, the person who is against this ideology is an enemy — and that's the moment when the danger kicks in.

And is this what led to the rise of the Third Reich?

It's one of the roots. I cannot make a film about [all the elements of] fascism; it's too complex. [laughs] But you can see in this village the whole structure of the society, from the Baron to the poor people, so it's a bit of a mirror of society at this time. It mirrors society in general, looking at this particular village — because all of them are working for this baron, and he's the one who has the absolute power in the village. And this hierarchy of people is the same as you'll find, in a broader sense, in the entire society. It's like looking at society with a magnifying glass. I tried to create a model, or a sample. It's not the only seed of radicalism, but it's one of the seeds.

And it's something that was exploited by the government to control its people.

It's always this way! [laughs] Everywhere. The people who have the power use the ideologies to get what they want. I painted a picture of the old Europe, not just of Germany. Because the First World War was the countries' big break with the past and the history of Europe, to a new era, and that was a very important thing. People say that the Second World War was only a follow-up to the first one. The first one was the much more impor-

tant clash of culture, and of the situation in which politics and church were completely combined. The God of Nietzsche died with the 19th century. [laughs]

In the film, there's a scene where the pastor's daughter is standing in the doorway of the classroom, eating an apple and watching the kids misbehave, with no sense of responsibility, though she knows that this behavior isn't acceptable. Is this absence of responsibility the kind of thing that can lead to violence without remorse?

It was not intended by me! [laughs] She is looking; she is the only one who is at the door, so she's there to see when the teacher and her father come. So that's your interpretation. But I'm hoping for every interpretation! Most of my work is creating situations that can be seen from different points of view, because it's on you to decide, not on me. [laughs]

It was unclear in the film as to which acts of cruelty were committed by which people, except for the scene where the daughter went to her father's office, took out the bird, cut its head off, and left it on his desk. That was one of the only events that's straightforward in the whole movie. It was very clear.

Good!

What creates the kind of personality that can do something like that?

Every one of us is capable of this kind of cruelty. There is a famous quote from Goethe: "There is no crime of which I do not deem myself capable." I think he was a wise man. [laughs] I think that you need not be a special character to do this.

But most of us don't actually do it.
Ça va!

A child could think about this terrible thing because she's angry with her father, but this child did it.

First of all, it's good that everyone is not committing these kinds of crimes. [laughs] But that doesn't mean that everyone is not capable of that. Usually, the mainstream cinema has these simple questions and answers. There is the one who is the victim, and the one who commits the crime, and this is always very clear — and that calms down the audience, because it makes them feel comfortable. I think that art is not there to comfort, or to calm people down. Art is there to raise questions. The politicians have the answers, because they want to be reelected. [laughs] But art is not like politics. I don't want to lie to the audience with simple ideas or solutions. Life is very complex! In all of my films, I always try — I don't know if I achieve it — to approach the way I see life in a very complex way. Complex and full of contradictions.



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Yes, of course! If I go to the movies, I don't like to get pre-formulated, or pre-fabricated answers for everything. I like to get into a situation where I can start thinking in a new way, or that I can reflect on in a new way. I like the inspiration of the cinema, and not so much the simple answers. And with books, it's the same thing. A book that simply tells me the way things are in the world is ridiculous.

I don't have the answers to the big questions of human life. I can just look at something precisely, and push your nose against it – and my nose, too!

You're not interested in going to a film and feeling satisfied that you've seen it.

That's lost time! [laughs]

You've said that that kind of satisfaction makes a film easy to forget.

Of course. I leave and I have forgotten the film. A film is more like a ramp when you're skiing. It's for taking off, but the jumping and the flying, the audience has to do. You have to construct the ramp very well, so they can jump!

And then we're responsible for taking off with the ideas?

Yes!

What is your motivation to encourage people to think about these issues of suppressed emotion and its dangers?

These are the things that are all around us in our daily lives. These are the things we have to deal with, all the time.

You said once that the truth is always hidden, and that there are thousands of truths, and it's just a matter of perspective. Can you talk a little about that?

Do you know what the truth is? I don't! What is the truth? It's a question of point of view. If you read some books about history, and you read German books and French books about the same time period, every book has its own truth — which is the opposite from the other one! So, what is the truth? I don't know. It's a question of the responsibility you have to yourself to be honest. But to be honest in what you say and do is still something different from truth, because it is connected to yourself. The only thing we can try to do is to be honest. And that's a lot!

You have also expressed an idea about people's fighting for a false ideal — like how people are willing to fight for an ideal of their family, even if the ideal isn't based in reality.

There is a line in *Caché* about what we are willing to do to not lose what we have. And unfortunately, that's true, because it's hard to

lose something, and it's hard to be honest, and give up things. In *Caché*, Georges is hiding something bad that he did when he was young, and he behaves badly now because he is afraid he will lose something. So people continue to fight for a false ideal because they still think it makes sense to fight for it — for themselves. They don't want to give up what they have. It's like the First World and the Third World. We don't like to give up our comfort. It's the same

thing. We find a lot of excuses for why we don't want to give things up, but the fact is that we just don't want to.

What I found most frustrating about *Caché* was that no matter how much it was put right in front of him that he had done a terrible thing as a child, Georges refuses to accept that he did something wrong.

This is the guilt. When he was a child — and all children are egoistic — what he did was not very sympathetic, but I can understand it. The little child is the little prince of the family, and he didn't want to lose that. For a five-year-old child, maybe. But as an adult person, looking at what he did, and to insist that he did nothing wrong — that's his guilt. It's not about his guilt as a child.

It seems like his life, and the life of his wife and son, would have been so much better if he had accepted it and dealt with it.

I agree! But life is different.

Your films deal with the unfortunate ways in which a lot people live their lives, and the resulting consequences. What do you think people can do in their relationships and in their lives that would make things better?

I'm not God. [laughs] But like I said before: to try to be honest. That's not a little thing; there are a lot of things to do! It's easy to say and difficult to do. I don't have the answers to the big questions of human life. I can just look at something precisely, and push your nose against it — and my nose, too!

Do you learn more about the ideas you're exploring as you're writing them, and as you put the film together?

Always during the writing. The writing is the creative process; the rest is hard work.

So as you're writing, you're learning more about the ideas that you're exploring?

I try to see a little bit clearer. It's difficult. I

don't know if I'm clearer now than before I wrote this play, or another play. I can't say. I know very little, so I try! [laughs]

Can you talk a little about your history?

I was born in Germany, but I spent my childhood in Austria. I studied philosophy there. Then I went to Germany, where I was involved in television. I developed the scripts, and was involved in the production of television projects. I did this for years after

my studies, and then I started to direct theater for some years. Then I directed my first television project. And for fifteen or twenty years, I directed ten or twelve television films, and a lot of plays. Then at the age of 46, I did my first film. [laughs] Now I'm 67. I learned everything from scratch! For me, theater was very important because that's where you really learn to work with actors. In film, you don't have time to learn it; you have to know it. The background of German, or European theater is that you have much more time to work with the actors. It's different from here in Los Angeles. So when people say that the actors are very good in my films, I think it's because I worked with actors for weeks and months in the theater. Because in theater there, you have much more time, and many more possibilities to try things, and to start all over again. So you really work with the actors.

You've done movies in German and in French. Are there any major differences between directing in the two languages?

Yes, I speak German better than French! This film, *The White Ribbon*, is the first time in ten years that I've directed in German, and I was much more relaxed than in the previous ten years. My French is not so bad, but I did one film here, the remake of *Funny Games*, in English. And now you hear my English, so it was very, very difficult. [laughs] It's not about explaining things, because I can show it. The problem is scanning what's going on around me, and being aware of what people are saying. In Germany, I hear everything, because it's my native tongue. The American film was the most difficult. I did four films in French, and in school I had French, but no English. So French is easier for me.

Are you planning your next project?

Yes, I have one, but I have to write it now, and I'm always giving interviews! [laughs] It's a film about elderly people — 80 years and older. It will be in French. The humiliation of this period. Not a very funny thing. ▼